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# Mount Sinai: Orientalist Images of the Mountain of God

James Ellis<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Case Western Reserve University. Email: jellis@yu.edu

## Abstract

The remote, stony peaks of the southern Sinai Peninsula played an inordinate role in history. They lie at a distance from the ancient overland trade routes that once linked Africa and Asia. However, one of these peaks, Mount Sinai, was critical to the development of the Abrahamic religions, particularly Judaism and Christianity. The Hebrew Bible says that God gave the Israelites their secular and spiritual law at Mount Sinai. Since the earliest centuries CE, Europeans exhibited special reverence for the site. Rome's Empress Consort Helena commissioned a chapel at Mount Sinai and the Byzantine Emperor Justinian built a monastery around Saint Helena's chapel. As international transportation improved in the nineteenth century, a steady stream of British and French explorers, intellectuals, and pilgrims poured into the Holy Land, Egypt, and Sinai. Some were artists, intent on seeing and recording historic locations. They had various motives: cultural curiosity, pecuniary reward, and spiritual quest. These artists left to posterity a fascinating visual record of Mount Sinai: the *Mountain of Moses*, the *Mountain of God*. This essay explores the life stories and motives of a select few of these artists and their relevant artworks. The purpose is to inform students and scholars about a significant cross-cultural intersection of religious history and art.

**Keywords:** Egypt, Landscape Painting, Mount Sinai, Orientalism

## 1. Introduction

Throughout history, Sinai has served as a connection between Africa, Asia, and Europe, between the east and the west (see, for example, Trombley 2014: 180-182). The Ottoman Empire established control over Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula in 1517 by annexing the Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt and establishing a naval presence on the Red Sea. The *Eyalet* (or province) of Egypt was a key administrative division of the Ottomans between 1517 and 1867, with a brief interruption during the French occupation of 1798-1801. The lands of Egypt became a desirable travel destination for Europeans as transportation improved and the international tourism industry grew during the first five decades of the nineteenth century (Anderson 2012). Muhammad Ali Pasha al-Mas'ud ibn Agha (1769-1849), also known as Muhammad Ali of Egypt and the Sudan, was the Ottoman governor of Egypt from 1805 until 1848. Muhammad Ali Pasha developed and expanded his power, in part, by welcoming British and European travelers to the region. Following the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815), tourists from the United Kingdom enjoyed a new degree of security around the Mediterranean, and they flocked to many areas of the *Holy Land* (the geographical area associated with the Bible).

The Sinai Peninsula has been a land link connecting Egypt's principle cities with the cities of modern Israel and Syria, and the Near East (fig. 1). Sinai is significant to adherents of the Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity,

and Islam. The book of Exodus – in the Hebrew Torah and the Christian Old Testament – says the patriarch Moshe, or Moses, spoke with God through a *burning bush* and received the *Ten Commandments* at Mount Sinai (Exodus 3; 19-20, King James Version, KJV). Religious historians believe Moses lived sometime during the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries BCE. Although scholars debate the precise identity of Mount Sinai (Hobbs 1995), many think the Biblical events occurred at Mount Horeb, a 7,500 feet granite peak in the south-central area of the Sinai Peninsula (fig. 2). Mount Sinai/Horeb has many designations, including the Hebrew *Har ha-Elohim*, meaning “Mountain of God,” and the Arabic *Jebel Musa*, which translates as “Mountain of Moses.”



Figure 1  
Political Map of Sinai Peninsula.  
Public Domain.



Figure 2  
Mount Horeb is near  
Sinai's southern tip.

According to the book of Exodus, at one point in his life, Moses was a shepherd and he lived among the Midianite clans, presumably in the southern Sinai desert. Exodus says that while Moses was watching over his sheep,

[he] came to the mountain of God, even to Horeb. And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed. And Moses said, I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt. And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I. And he said, Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground ... I am the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob [or Israel] (Exodus 3:1-6).

God explained to Moses that he had seen the affliction of the Israelites living in oppressive Egyptian bondage and he would use Moses to deliver them from their captivity and to take them to another land of freedom, “flowing with milk and honey.” From the burning bush, God instructed Moses to leave Midian, to go the Egyptian pharaoh, and to demand that he release the Israelites. Christian hermits established communities at what they believed was the site of the burning bush during the first centuries CE.

Empress Consort Helena, or Saint Helena (ca. 246-330), was a member of the Roman Empire’s ruling family and the mother of Emperor Constantine the Great (ca. 272-337). According to the ancient historian Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 260-ca. 340), Saint Helena converted to Christianity sometime around 310 and she undertook a pilgrimage to the Roman province of Syria Palaestina and Jerusalem in 326-328 (see Averil 1999). Helena ordered the construction of churches at the locations of Jesus Christ’s Nativity and his Ascension and construction of a small chapel at Sinai commemorating the purported site of the burning bush. In 1843, the British artist John Frederick Lewis painted the chapel’s interior (fig. 3). Outside Helena’s chapel, a bramble shrub grows (fig. 4), which monks claim is a descendant of the bush Moses saw.



Figure 3  
John Frederick Lewis,  
*Chapel of the Burning Bush*, 1843.  
Public Domain.



Figure 4  
Saint Catherine's Monastery.

The title of the book of Exodus comes from a Greek term (*exodos*) that literally means “the road out.” *Hodos* means “a road” and *ex* means “out.” Exodus provides an account of what happened when the Israelites left Egyptian bondage, and they took “the road out” of Egypt. The Israelites traveled eastward, from the Egyptian land of Goshen toward Sinai, where the Bible says another miraculous event occurred.

In the third month, when the children of Israel were gone forth out of the land of Egypt, the same day came they into the wilderness of Sinai. For they were departed from Rephidim [an oasis or stopping point near Mount Horeb], and were come to the desert of Sinai, and had pitched in the wilderness; and there Israel camped before the mount. And Moses went up unto God, and the Lord called unto him out of the mountain ... And mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire: and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly. And when the voice of the trumpet sounded long, and waxed louder and louder, Moses spake, and God answered him by a voice. And the Lord came down upon mount Sinai, on the top of the mount: and the Lord called Moses up to the top of the mount; and Moses went up. ... [And after God explained his law to Moses,] the Lord said unto Moses ... I will give thee tables of stone, and a law, and commandments which I have written; that thou mayest teach them. ... And he gave unto Moses, when he had made an end of communing with him upon mount Sinai, two tables of testimony, tables of stone, written with the finger of God (Exodus 19:1-3, 19:18-20; 24:12; 31:18).

## 2. European art

Since the beginnings of the Christian era in Europe, artists tried to capture visually the awesome literary imagery of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments. A mosaic in the sixth century Byzantine Basilica of San Vitale, in Italy, shows the patriarch standing on the mount's summit receiving the law from the outstretched hand of God (fig. 5). Many centuries later, French painter Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904) envisioned Moses atop Sinai clutching the enormous tablets inscribed with God's decree, enveloped in an otherworldly radiance (fig. 6). In the valley below, the wonderstruck Israelites run in terror or stand transfixed by the spectacle.



Figure 5  
Unknown artist,  
San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy.  
Public Domain.



Figure 6  
Jean-Léon Gérôme,  
*Moses on Mount Sinai*, 1895.  
Public Domain.

Art historians give Jean-Léon Gérôme, and most of the artists discussed in this essay, the label *Orientalist*. In the discipline of art history, the term *Orientalism* refers to a general enthusiasm among European painters, printmakers, and photographers for Near Eastern and Asian (or “Oriental”) subjects and styles. This enthusiasm resulted, in part, from nineteenth-century European colonial expansion (Said 1993). This is when, for the first time, significant numbers of French, British, and other European artists began visiting and portraying new, distant locales, from the Northern African Mediterranean to Southeast Asia (Sinai is usually regarded as a geographical part of Asia).

Writers of ancient Rome formulated a conceptual Orient to describe the land and cultures of North Africa and the Middle East. The Middle English word *orient* derives from two Latin terms: *orior*, which means, “to rise,” and *oriēns*, meaning “the east.” The opposed word *occident* comes from the Latin terms *occidere*, which means, “to fall,” and *occidēns*, meaning “the west.” The ancient Romans saw the sunrise each morning over the eastern horizon, over the Orient, and they saw the sunset each evening in the west, in the Occident. The French used a related socio-geographical term: *Levant*, from the Latin word *levō*, meaning “to lift.” The Levant denoted the eastern Mediterranean lands, where, from a western European perspective, the sun was lifted into the sky each morning. The equivalent Arabic term, *al-Mashriq*, roughly translates as “the place in the east where the sun rises.” In its broadest scope, the Levant included the Sinai Peninsula.

Ancient Romans, and European writers and artists for centuries thereafter, imagined the distant, mysterious Orient (or Levant) as “a place of romance” where “exotic beings” lived in ancient landscapes, a place where a person could relive “haunting memories” and have “remarkable experiences” (Said 1979: 1). Influential postcolonial scholar, Edward Said (1935-2003) described Orientalism as a “western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.” European culture, Said argued, “gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient” (Said 1979: 9, 11). Orientalist literature and religious artworks were powerful tools used to develop ethnography and the travel trade.

The French army’s campaign in Egypt and Syria established the first sustained nineteenth-century European presence in Egypt. General Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821) led a military force into Alexandria and Cairo in 1798 and the French occupied the country until 1801. In late December 1798, General Bonaparte led a group of French intellectuals, which included the painter André Dutertre (1753-1842), across the Red Sea to visit Mount Sinai and Saint Catherine’s Monastery. Dutertre was one of the founding members of the Institut d’Égypte, a scholarly society Napoleon founded in Cairo, which specialized in Egyptology. The Institut published a twenty-four volume *Description de l’Égypte*, illustrating the topography, architecture, and people of the region. The publication attracted many prominent French artists to North Africa and the Near East, including Jean-Léon Gérôme, Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863), Théodore Chassériau (1819–1856), and Alexandre-Gabriel Decamps (1803–1860). A wave of British artists came later.

### 3. Adrien Dauzats

Travel writing and travelers’ narratives involve the visual practices of seeing and looking (Alù and Hill 2018: 1). “To travel is to see – travel is essentially a way of seeing, a mode of seeing: it is grounded in the eye, in our visual capacity” (McGrane 1989: 116). First-hand published travel journals usually blend categories. They combine social and topographical observation, historical information, and subjective reflection. During the European Age of Exploration (roughly 1450-1600), travel accounts were widely read, and by the eighteenth century their popularity in Europe was only surpassed by romantic fiction (Pratt 1992; Bird 2018). Many of the earliest travel accounts describe Christian missionary activities or religious pilgrimages to the Holy Land (Korte 2000). In the early nineteenth century, when touring beyond Europe became more convenient, prominent French and British authors ventured to Egypt and Sinai to feed the eager demand for travel accounts. In the era before the widespread dissemination of commercial photography, they often brought along an artist to represent distant scenes.

Adrien Dauzats (1804-1868) was a French artist who specialized in landscapes and *genres* (scenes of everyday life). After Dauzats completed his training at Paris’ École de Dessin (School of Design), he accompanied the noted French-Belgian traveler and author Baron Isidore Justin Séverin Taylor (1789-1879) on a series of extended trips

through the Near East and Egypt. On these trips, Baron Taylor conducted research for travel books, and Dauzats produced illustrations. Engravings of Dauzats' depictions of Mount Sinai appeared in Taylor's 1837 book entitled *La Syrie, l'Égypte, la Palestine et la Judée, considérées sous leur aspect archéologique, descriptif et pittoresque*, which is roughly translated, An Account of Syria, Egypt, Palestine, and Judea's Archaeological, Descriptive, and Picturesque Aspects (fig. 7). Dauzats also collaborated with French novelist Alexandre Dumas père (1802-1870), the famed author of *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *The Three Musketeers*. In the summer of 1836, Dauzats and Dumas journeyed across Egypt and Sinai. Their odyssey lasted months; however, the main outcome was Dumas' relatively brief, picturesque travel essay entitled *Quinze Jours au Sinai*, or Fifteen Days at Sinai.

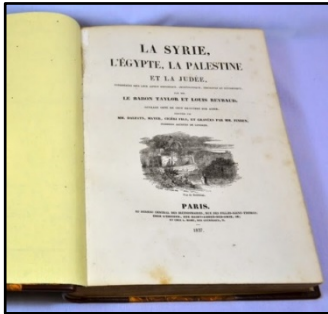


Figure 7  
Baron Taylor,  
*La Syrie ...*, 1837.  
Public Domain.

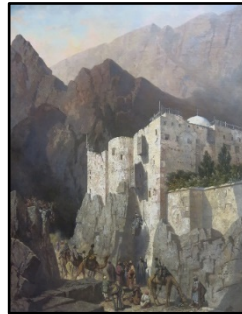


Figure 8  
*Saint Catherine's Monastery at  
Mount Sinai*, 1845.  
Public Domain.

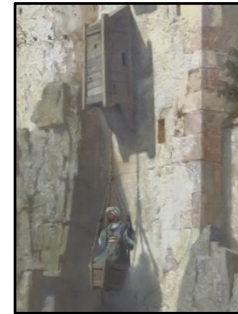


Figure 9  
Detail of figure 8.

After trekking across the desert for days during the stiflingly summer of 1836, Dumas, Dauzats, and their large caravan of camels and guides reached the narrow, rocky passes approaching Mount Horeb. Dumas wrote,

On turning an enormous rock, which hid the horizon, [we saw] the magnificent peak of Sinai. And on its eastern slope, at about a third of the height, appeared the convent, a strong fortress, built in the shape of an irregular quadrangle. ... We were attaining the haven which Christian devotion has preserved for those who travel over this ocean of sand, and amid its rocks of granite. It was our Promised Land, and I doubt if the Israelites were more anxious about theirs (Taylor 1839: 236-237).

Adrien Dauzats' most famous artwork resulting from the trip shows what happened next (figs. 8, 9). The caravan stopped at the base of the fortress-like walls of Saint Catherine's Monastery. There was no gate. The shutter of a small window about thirty feet above the ground opened and "a Greek monk, clothed in black, wearing a red hat without a brim, cautiously put out his head." He asked Dumas and Dauzats who they were and they answered they were French travelers who had come from Cairo. A basket tied to a rope descended, the men deposited their letters of introduction, and the monk drew the basket back upward. Finding the papers were in order, the monk again lowered the basket, this time with a stick fastened crossways at its ends. This was the seat on which Dumas and Dauzats rode up to the window and into the monastery (Taylor 1839: 239-240). Dauzats' image shows one of them lifted upward, dressed in local attire.

Saint Catherine's is one of the oldest Greek Orthodox monasteries; it was founded when the Byzantine Emperor Justinian I (ca. 482-565) built fortifications around Saint Helena's Chapel of the Burning Bush (fig. 10). The monastery is home to the world's oldest continuously functioning library. For many centuries, it housed the *Codex Sinaiticus*, the earliest known copy of the Christian Bible. The library also once contained the original *Ashtiname of Muhammad*, a document written by the Caliph and scribe Ali ibn Abi Talib (601-661) and sealed with an imprint representing the hand of Muhammad (ca. 570-632), the prophet and founder of Islam (fig. 11). The *Ashtiname* granted protection to the monks of Saint Catherine's Monastery (see Tromans 2008: 100-110), and historically the document has represented a bridge between Muslims and Christians (Khan 2009). During the seventh century, Saint Catherine's massive fortified walls offered a refuge for local Christians threatened by the invading Muslim forces of Amr ibn al-As al-Sahmi (ca. 573-664). Amr spared the monastery when the monks presented the

*Ashtiname* and when they agreed to erect a small mosque within their walls. The mosque still stands today (fig. 15).



Figure 10  
Saint Catherine's Monastery, 2020.  
Joonas Plaan / CC BY 2.0.



Figure 11  
Copy of *Ashtiname of Muhammad*  
Public Domain.

Adrien Dauzats and Alexandre Dumas stayed at Saint Catherine's for five days and spent most of their time sketching the environs and making detailed notes in journals. A highlight of their visit was ascending to the peak of Mount Horeb, an exhilarating experience Dumas described. "After five hours of laborious climbing, we reached the summit of Sinai, and remained for a moment motionless, overwhelmed by the magnificent panorama which was unfolded before our eyes, entirely peopled by Scriptural recollections, still so full, after a lapse of three thousand years, of awful majesty and poetic sublimity" (Taylor 1839: 253).

#### 4. Joseph Mallord William ("J. M. W.") Turner

Many artists who never traveled to the Holy Land still attempted to capture Mount Sinai's "majesty and poetic sublimity" in their art. J. M. W. Turner (1775-1851) was an English Romantic painter and one of Europe's leading nineteenth century landscape artists. Turner was renowned for his awe-inspiring, expressionistic imagery that described the powerful, mysterious aspects of nature. He was also an inveterate traveler; between 1802 and 1845, Turner went on more than fifty extensive tours throughout the European continent. However, unlike some of his artist contemporaries, Turner never ventured beyond Europe, to Africa or to the Near East. That did not prevent him from producing illustrations of exotic locales that he never visited for travel books, historical literature, and to illustrate poetry. Turner simply tapped into his fertile imagination.

Thomas Campbell (1777-1844) was a Scottish poet, today known primarily for his sentimental, narrative verses, such as "The Pleasures of Hope," of 1799. Campbell was a great admirer of J. M. W. Turner. The prominent Victorian-era publisher, Edward Moxon (1801-1858) issued *The Poetical Works of Thomas Campbell* (1837), an anthology that included twenty pictorial vignettes by Turner. Two of England's leading professional printmakers, Robert Wallis (1794-1878) and William Miller (1796-1882), engraved Turner's designs for reproduction. In one of the epic poems included in Campbell's anthology, he reflected on his life and his mortality and the eternal mysteries that awaited after death (Campbell 1837: 46-47):

Oh! Deep-enchanting prelude to repose,  
The dawn of bliss, the twilight of our woes!  
Yet half I hear the panting spirit sigh,  
It is a dreadful and awful thing to die!  
Mysterious worlds, untravell'd by the sun!  
Where Time's far wandering tide has never run,  
From your unfathom'd shades, and viewless spheres,  
A warning comes, unheard by other ears.

‘Tis Heaven’s commanding trumpet, long and loud,  
*Like Sinai’s thunder, pealing from a cloud!* [emphasis added].

In Turner’s illustration for the poem, entitled *Sinai’s Thunder* (fig. 12), the patriarch Moses and his brother, the Hebrew high priest Aaron, stand on a rocky outcropping in the foreground overlooking the people of Israel. They are camped in a valley beneath Mount Sinai. Moses displays the two tablets upon which God has carved the Ten Commandments. In the upper background, Turner represented God engulfed in dazzling light. His arms are outstretched and lightning flies from his presence, suggesting his authority over nature and man. Somewhat concealed on the left-hand edge, Turner included an anachronistic depiction of Noah’s Ark floating in a flooded terrain (fig. 13), to indicate God’s mercy and man’s eternal hope for salvation (Genesis 6-9).

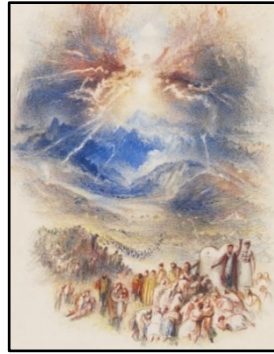


Figure 12  
 J. M. W. Turner,  
*Sinai’s Thunder*, 1837.  
 Public Domain.

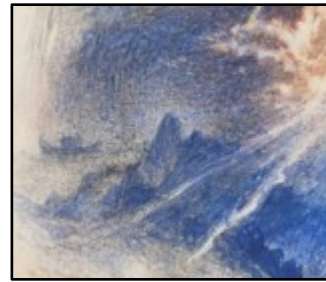


Figure 13  
 Detail of figure 12.

Turner’s work fits within *Romanticism*, a movement in the arts that valued individualism and the personal expression of transcendent themes. The influential German philosopher and aesthetician, G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831) wrote that in Romanticism “the form is determined by the inner idea ... that this art is called upon to represent” (Hegel 1975: 604). In Turner’s historical pictures, such as *Sinai’s Thunder*, he sought to represent the noble and grand aspects of an ideal world, rather than the particularities of reality. Musicians and poets were generally more effective in expressing Romanticism’s spirit than were visual artists; Turner was a notable exception. Other artists, including David Wilkie, consciously tried to infuse Biblical subjects with contemporary realism.

## 5. The quest for Biblical realism

David Wilkie (1785-1841) was a very successful British genre painter. He rose to the position of Principal Painter to the monarchs of the United Kingdom, William IV (1765-1837) and Victoria (1819-1901). Wilkie was born in the tiny village of Pitlessie, in Fife County, Scotland. His father was the Anglican minister of Fife’s Cults parish. Although Wilkie is not remembered principally as a religious painter, throughout his life he harbored a desire to reform Christian art by eliminating its artifices, such as contrived settings, decor, and clothing. Wilkie wanted to show Biblical scenes as he thought they originally appeared. Wilkie claimed, “a Martin Luther in painting is as much called for as in theology, to sweep away the abuses by which our divine pursuit [producing Protestant Christian art] is encumbered” (see Tromans 2007: 197). Art historian, Jennifer Meagher opined, “The explicitness of detail encouraged in the Orientalist style upheld the Protestant necessity for iconographic clarity and fidelity to nature in religious art” (Meagher 2004).

Late in his life, David Wilkie decided to see the Holy Land first-hand. Wilkie left London in the autumn of 1840, voyaging across Europe to Constantinople. From there, he sailed to Smyrna (Izmir, Turkey) and traveled on to



Jerusalem. After a few productive weeks in Jerusalem (Briggs 2011), Wilkie continued onward to the region of Mount Sinai, before finally reaching Alexandria. In Alexandria, Wilkie completed a portrait of Muhammad Ali of Egypt and the Sudan (1769-1849), the Albanian Ottoman governor and de facto King of Egypt. The portrait would be his final work. On June 1, 1841, David Wilkie fell ill and died at sea off Gibraltar, on his return journey to Great Britain. Wilkie filled his final sketchbooks with highly detailed depictions of Egypt's ruling class and the local guides that brought him through the deserts of Egypt and Sinai (Wilkie 1843).

William Holman Hunt (1827-1910), the English painter and a founder of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, had beliefs that were similar Wilkie's (see Burritt 2020). Hunt thought that he could help revitalize Christian (specifically Anglican and Protestant) art through truthful, detailed renderings of the natural world. Unlike other contemporaneous groups of British painters, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood did not mimic the aestheticism and rationalism embodied in Italian Renaissance imagery. Hunt explained his goal, "My desire is very strong to use my powers to make more tangible Jesus Christ's history and teaching" (Hunt 1905: 349). Hunt spent years researching Biblical themes in Egypt, Syria, and Palestine, and during this time he completed many of his best-known religious works, such as *The Scapegoat*, of 1855. Although Hunt created many landscapes during his years abroad, and he visited and sketched Mount Sinai (Hunt 1905: 277), his best-known topographical studies were of the environs around the Sea of Galilee, such as *The Plain of Esdraelon*, which he completed in 1877.

## 6. Edward Thomas Daniell

Unlike Wilkie and Hunt — who were prominent, primarily secular, artists who occasionally delved into Christian topics — Edward Thomas Daniell (1804-1842) was an ordained clergyman and an artist by avocation. Daniell made his largest mark on the history of art with a series of watercolors produced on the pilgrimage he took to the Holy Land at the end of his life. Daniell was born into a wealthy family in London and raised in the historic city of Norwich. As a young man, he learned to paint from Norwich's Romantic landscape artist John Crome (1768-1821). After studying classics at Oxford, Daniell was ordained as a priest in the Church of England and appointed the curate of St. Mark's Church on North Audley Street in London. During this time, the Reverend Daniell became a confidant of J. M. W. Turner. In 1840, Daniell took a sabbatical and left London for a tour that began in Alexandria, Egypt, continued on through Palestine and Syria, before finally skirting along the coast of Anatolia (modern Turkey). At the end of his journey, Daniell went on a brief side trip to sketch the ruins of the ancient region of Lycia, during which he contracted malaria. He died in Adalia (Antalya, Turkey) in 1842, at the age of thirty-eight.



Figure 14  
Rev. Edward Thomas Daniell,  
*Jebal Musa*, 1841.  
Public Domain.



Figure 15  
The mosque today.

During June 1841, the Reverend Daniell produced at least four watercolors of Mount Sinai and Saint Catherine's Monastery (Beecheno 1889: 35-37). He entitled one his watercolors *Jebal Musa* (fig. 14), using the Arabic term (جَبَل مُوسَى) that is translated Mountain of Moses. The work represents the mosque (or *masjid*) that the Christian monks of Saint Catherine's built in the seventh century to appease the Muslim military leader, Amr ibn al-As al-Sahmi. The mosque was extensively restored during the twelfth and twentieth centuries. The Qur'an mentions Jebal Musa more than once. For example, the Qur'an's ninety-fifth *surah* (or chapter), which discusses the creation

of humanity, is translated, “By the fig and the olive. And Mount Sinai. And this safe land. We created man in the best design. Then reduced him to the lowest of the low.” (QS 95:1-5, ClearQuran).

The Reverend Daniell employed an extremely limited palette in his watercolors. He also indicated forms with broad, suggestive washes, a bold method related to the style of J. M. W. Turner. During Daniell’s final days, as he travelled through the Holy Land recording its topography, he reflected on Turner’s atmospheric, semi-abstract landscapes. His travelling companions later recalled,

Poor Daniell, whose spirit was deeply imbued with the love and appreciation of art – the friend and enthusiastic admirer of Turner – would sit and gaze with intense delight on the gorgeous landscape; and eloquently dilating on its charms, and appeal to them as evidences of the truth and nature which he maintained were ever present in the works of the greatest living master, whose merits he thoroughly understood (Beecheno 1889: 23).

The English poet and art scholar, Robert Laurence Binyon (1869-1943) delighted in Daniell’s capacity to capture sublime views with an economy of means. Binyon wrote, “What strikes one most at first is the astonishing air of space and magnitude conveyed, the fluid wash of sunlight in these towering gorges and open valleys” (Binyon 1899: 212). Art historian Josephine Walpole singled out the artist’s final studies of Egypt and Sinai for their “delicacy of line” and “muted but distinctive” washes. She observed they are “impressive in their simplicity” (Walpole 1997: 158).

In all likelihood, the Reverend Daniell created his Sinai watercolors as studies for more elaborate works that he planned to complete, but never did. When Daniell died, he was returning to London to resume his work as a full-time Anglican priest and a part-time artist. His personal journals do not suggest he intended to publish or profit from his Holy Land studies. However, Daniell was aware that there was a growing demand among London’s collectors and dealers for Orientalist images of Egypt and the Near East. Indeed, Daniell’s journals indicate he was directly inspired to travel abroad by the Egyptian scenes of the Scottish painter, David Roberts (Beecheno 1889: 9), which were published, to great critical and public acclaim, beginning in the late 1830s.

## 7. David Roberts

During the 1830s, a revolutionary wave shook Europe. A “Romantic nationalist” revolution in the Netherlands led to the establishment of an independent Kingdom of Belgium. A similar uprising in France, the “July Revolution” of 1830, overthrew the French monarch: Charles X. Revolution was in the air. Art historian and archaeologist, Patrick Hunt credits David Roberts (1796-1864) with helping stimulate Britain’s Victorian-era fascination with the Near East and Egypt. According to Hunt, the British upper classes were quite familiar with the Biblical accounts of the rise and fall of empires, “as much as intellectual fare as anything else and staple bread-and-butter for religious imagination” (Hunt 2020).

David Roberts learned to paint as a tradesman, rather than as a fine artist. For close to two decades, Roberts was a theater designer and scenery painter in Edinburgh and Glasgow. He then moved to London and worked with the English marine artist Clarkson Stanfield (1793-1867) on several large-scale moving dioramas and panoramas of famous sea battles and remote locations (Lambourne 1999: 156-159). Like other artists who specialized in picturesque topography and architecture, Roberts traveled widely in search of exotic topics to portray.



Figure 16  
Robert Scott Lauder,  
*David Roberts in Oriental Clothing*, 1840.  
Public Domain.

In 1836, David Roberts contributed watercolors, based on other artists' designs, for the Reverend Thomas Hartwell Horne's ambitious (and financially successful) visual travelogue *Landscape Illustrations of the Bible*. Inspired by this project, Roberts set off on an eleven-month tour in the late summer of 1838 that took him through Egypt, the Sinai Peninsula, and Petra (Jordan), before he finally arrived in Jerusalem around Easter 1839. Roberts began his tour by sailing up and down the Nile River, sketching the monuments and ruins of the ancient dynasties. Early in 1839, he left Cairo and ventured east through Suez and southward to the lower lands of Sinai, stopping to stay at Saint Catherine's Monastery for five days. By the time he finally left the Holy Land to return to London, Roberts had filled several sketchbooks with drawings and had completed around three hundred watercolors. This collection of studies served as source material for his paintings for many years (Tromans 2008: 102-103).

Roberts' caravan rode camels through the desert for ten days to reach Saint Catherine's. His Sinai guides included Hanafee Ismail Effendi, an Egyptian convert to Christianity, and more than a dozen Arab men of the Beni Saids tribe (fig. 17). A series of images shows Roberts' party ascending Mount Horeb's rugged, winding paths amid a wondrous terrain (figs. 18-19).



Figure 17  
David Roberts,  
*Approach, Mount Sinai*, 1839.  
Public Domain.



Figure 18  
David Roberts, *Ascent to Sinai's  
Lower Range*, 1839.  
Public Domain.

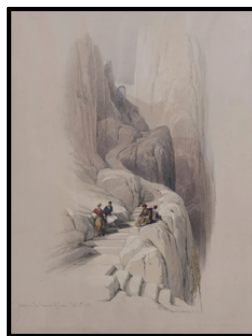


Figure 19

David Roberts,  
*Ascent to Summit of Sinai*, 1839.  
Public Domain.

As he climbed, Roberts imagined the effect such terrain would have had on the ancient Israelites.

To a people whose entire living generation had seen only the level lands of Egypt, the Israelite march into this region of mountain magnificence, with its sharp and splintered peaks and profound valleys, must have been a perpetual source of astonishment and awe. No nobler school could have been conceived, for training a nation of slaves into a nation of freemen, or weaning a people from the grossness of idolatry to a sense of the grandeur and power of the God alike of Nature and Mind (Roberts 1855: 80).

London's F. G. Moon publishing firm obtained the rights to reproduce David Roberts' images for a three-volume travelogue entitled *The Holy Land, Syria, Idumea, Arabia, Egypt, and Nubia*. Belgian lithographer, Louis Haghe (1806-1885) created 247 lithographs for the project based on Roberts' watercolors. Haghe printed his tinted (or hand-colored) lithographs in two sizes: a "half-plate" of 12 x 9.5 in. and a "full-plate" of 19 x 12.5 in. It was a time-consuming and expensive project requiring the pre-production investment of subscriptions from wealthy patrons such as Queen Victoria, Muhammad Ali Pasha of Egypt, and British author Charles Dickens. Historians, connoisseurs, and curators consider the print series a milestone in the colored lithography medium.

## 8. John Frederick Lewis

Perhaps the best-known single Orientalist artwork depicting Mount Sinai is John Frederick Lewis' *A Frank Encampment in the Desert of Mount Sinai*, which Lewis completed in 1856. The work was featured in the annual exhibition of London's Society of Painters in Water Colours, where it was singled out for effusive praise. English critic and "Victorian Sage," John Ruskin (1819-1900) proclaimed that Lewis' watercolor was "among the most wonderful pictures in the world" (Ruskin 1903: 74).

John Frederick Lewis (1804-1876) was born in London. His father was an accomplished professional printmaker. Lewis showed his work for the first time at the Royal Academy in 1821 and thereafter studied and worked with the fashionable portrait painter and president of the Royal Academy, Thomas Lawrence (1769-1830). As soon as Lewis had established himself as an artist, he began travelling widely in search of unique subject matter. He went to the Scottish Highlands (1830), Spain and Morocco (1832-1834), Italy (1838-1839), and Greece and Turkey (1840-1841), before settling in 1842 in Egypt, where he stayed for a decade before returning to London. Lewis made detailed sketches and meticulous watercolors everywhere he went.

For several years, John Frederick Lewis and his wife lived in an upper-class Cairo residence, designed in the Turkish style. Lewis' images from this period are replete with Islamic architecture, decorations, and fashions. The British satirical novelist, William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-1863) visited Lewis at his opulent house in Cairo, and in his witty account, entitled *Notes of a Journey from Cornhill to Grand Cairo*, Thackeray described the artist as a "languid Lotus-eater," who led a "dreamy, hazy, lazy, tobaccofied life." According to Thackeray, Lewis was accustomed to going about Cairo "dressed up like an odious Turk" (Tromans 2008: 26), carrying a *Damascus scimitar*, a short Arab sword with a curved blade that broadens toward its point (fig. 20).



Figure 20  
John Frederick Lewis,  
*Self-portrait as Memlock Bey*, 1863.  
Present whereabouts unknown.

John Frederick Lewis' genre scenes of Egypt and Sinai "played upon western notions of Oriental luxury set amid bazaars, harems, [and] desert landscapes" (O'Neill 2007). *A Frank Encampment in the Desert of Mount Sinai* exemplifies the fascinating blend of western and eastern cultures that characterized Lewis' art (fig. 21).



Figure 21  
John Frederick Lewis  
*A Frank Encampment in the Desert of Mount Sinai*, 1856.  
Public Domain.

Lewis's scene is specifically a *Frank* encampment. The Franks were an ancient Germanic people who grew in prominence during the collapse of the Western Roman Empire and later consolidated their power during the Carolingian Empire (751-843). Eastern Orthodox Christians and Muslims of the medieval period used the term Frank generically, to describe western and central Europeans who followed the Latin rites of Catholicism. Later, people living in the Ottoman Empire and Egypt used the term even more generally, to refer to all the people of Christian Europe (James 1988).

Lewis' Frank was a British nobleman and politician named Frederick William Robert Stewart (1805-1872). Stewart was the fourth Marquess of Londonderry, and was commonly known as Viscount Castlereagh. Viscount Castlereagh toured the Orient and the Levant during the early 1840s, traveling from Cairo to Syria. In 1847, he published his journals from the trip under the title *Diary of a Journey to Damascus*. Viscount Castlereagh's party camped for five days at the base of Mount Sinai. In the center background of Lewis' painting, the artist showed the Monastery of Saint Catherine in the shadowed foothills of Mount Sinai.



Figure 22

Detail of figure 21.

On the right side of the scene (fig. 22), Viscount Castlereagh reclines on a Turkish rug, surrounded by his attendants. He is dressed in native clothing, including a scarlet, patterned headdress, matching Persian-style *kamarband* (or cummerbund), and pointed shoes. The attendants have unpacked all of the nobleman's western trappings and eastern souvenirs. He has his hunting dog (an English springer spaniel) and a second lapdog, a silver English tea service, and an opened bottle of Harvey's Sherry. He also has a long-stemmed Ottoman Turkish pipe, usually used for smoking tobacco. However, hashish use was rampant in nineteenth century Egypt (Nahas 1984), and judging by Viscount Castlereagh's languid pose and comatose expression, one might justifiably wonder what the bowl of his pipe actually contains. On the ground, behind a beautifully painted still life of dead pigeons, lies a map with the title *Syria, Ancient and Modern*. The critic John Ruskin was one of John Frederick Lewis' greatest supporters. Ruskin commented Lewis' *Frank Encampment*, might be read, as a whole, as "a map of antiquity and modernism in the East" (Hart 2011).



Figure 23

Detail of figure 21.

The desert guide named Hussein, a Bedouin shaykh (or sheik) of Gebel Tor, stands in stark contrast to Viscount Castlereagh (fig. 23). Hussein looks downward at his Frankish companion with a serious expression. According to one historian, Lewis had obvious admiration for Hussein; "he stands erect in front of the British lord, who lies supine amid the necessary clutter of 'civilized' accoutrements" (Williams 2001: 230). Viscount Castlereagh wrote in his journals that Hussein did not enjoy posing for Lewis' painting: "The sheik has been sitting for his picture much against his will as it is forbidden by the Qur'an and this evidently has weighed heavily on Hussein's mind. So that it is only by the power of pistols that he had been prevailed upon to allow himself to be immortalized by Lewis" (Stewart 2001: 259-260).

Orientalist paintings often depict a European (or Frankish) ambassador or envoy “approaching with trepidation the peripatetic court of an Oriental potentate” (Tromans 2008: 107). Lewis’ composition reverses this familiar scenario. Hussein “maintains a respectful distance from [the European traveler] ... His sandaled feet are carefully positioned at the edge of [the rug spread on the desert sand], indicating a polite but firm rejection of [the Viscount’s] temporary quarters” (Codell 2012: 66). Hussein’s posture, clenched hands, downward glance, and severe demeanor indicate his disapproval of the British nobleman, whose messy camp and lethargy display a troubling disregard for the hallowed setting, below the peaks of Mount Sinai.

## 9. Francis Frith

Three historical developments led to greater European access to the Sinai Peninsula during the latter decades of the nineteenth century: the opening of the Suez Canal, the rise of international travel companies, and the British military occupation of Egypt. The Suez Canal, constructed between 1859 and 1869, connected the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea. It allowed ships to travel from the North Atlantic, across the Mediterranean, and into the Indian Ocean (or vice-versa), avoiding the lengthy and costly voyage around the southern tip of Africa. The canal led to a dramatic increase in world trade and world travel (see Karabell 2003). Soon after the opening of the Suez Canal, French and British firms began organizing popular excursions to Egypt, the Middle East, and India. By 1890, the British travel firm Thomas Cook & Son employed a staff of one thousand in their Cairo office (Hunter 2004). In 1882, British forces occupied Egypt, though Egypt remained an autonomous province of the Ottoman Empire. By the end of the nineteenth century, the number of foreign residents in Egypt grew from a few thousand to more than 100,000 (Osman 2010: 33).

As the Sinai Peninsula became more physically accessible, improvements in photography allowed people to visit Sinai vicariously, in the comfort of their own homes. The rising popularity of nature photography ran parallel to a growing respect for realistic landscape painting. Throughout the nineteenth century, realistic landscape painting (as opposed to fanciful aestheticized constructs of nature) rose dramatically in importance, in the eyes of Europe’s art academies, critics, and the public. There was a “growing conviction that the unembellished landscape possessed intrinsic value: because it was made by God [and] because it was beautiful. ... The artistic corollary of this moral conception was that a careful visual record of the landscape was meaningful in itself” (Galassi 1981: 21). Photographs of the Holy Land could be particularly meaningful. The camera’s inability to compose or invent and the telling details and specificity of each print gave photographs of Mount Sinai a moral and spiritual dimension.

Francis Frith (1822-1898) was a widely respected, early English photographer, who made a name for himself with his views of the Middle East and Egypt. Frith learned the science and art of photography during the late 1840s, while recuperating from serious health problems. He ran a successful photographic studio in Liverpool until 1855/1856, when he decided to give up his business, in favor of traveling and taking topographic and architectural photos. He was a pioneering entrepreneur, selling faithful, documentary images of exciting, exotic locales to consumers who might be unable or disinclined to travel to the places he recorded (see Handy 1999: 216). Frith produced crisp, extremely detailed albumen silver prints using collodion-coated glass negatives. The albumen (or egg white) silver print was the most popular photographic method of the nineteenth century.

Many people in Britain first saw the Holy Land’s monuments and landscapes in Francis Frith’s photographs. Frith made three trips to Egypt and the Near East in a four-year span; he first visited Sinai in 1857. The demanding glass negative method required Frith to *fix* his images on the spot – whether he was inside an ancient tomb or inside the scorching confines of a tent in the desert heat – but the process produced remarkably crisp, truthful pictures. In 1858, Frith published his groundbreaking photo-essay entitled *Egypt, Sinai, and Jerusalem: a Series of Twenty Photographic Views*. The Orientalist author Sophia Lane Poole (1804-1891) and her son, the archaeologist Reginald Stuart Poole (1832-1895) provided accompanying textual descriptions. The Pooles were English, but they lived in Cairo for almost a decade. Ms. Poole wrote about her experiences in her autobiographical book *The Englishwoman in Egypt: Letters from Cairo*, of 1842. After Reginald Stuart Poole returned from Egypt, he became a leading Egyptologist and curator at the British Museum.



Figure 24  
Francis Frith,  
*Self-portrait, Egyptian Attire, 1857.*  
Public Domain.



Figure 25  
Francis Frith,  
*Distant View of Mount Serbal, ca. 1857.*  
Public Domain.



Figure 26  
Rev. Edward Thomas Daniell,  
*Djebel Serbal, Sinai, 1841.*  
Public Domain.

In the photograph entitled *Distant View of Mount Serbal* (fig. 25), Frith shows the jagged contour of Egypt's fifth highest peak. The Reverend Edward Thomas Daniell had painted Mount Serbal a generation earlier (fig. 26). Some Bible historians believe Mount Serbal, rather than Mount Horeb, is the Mount Sinai mentioned in the Bible. German missionary and scholar, Johann Ludwig Schneller (1820-1896), for example, reached this conclusion after diligently comparing the Biblical account with the topography and historical traditions concerning Mount Serbal (Schneller 1910: 189).

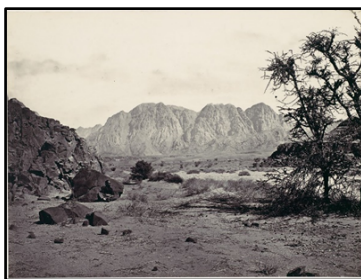


Figure 27  
Francis Frith,  
*The Written Valley, ca. 1857.*  
Public Domain.

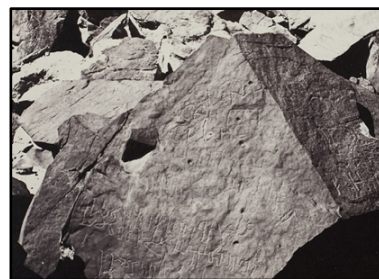


Figure 28  
Francis Frith,  
*Inscriptions, Wade-el-Mukattab, ca. 1857.*  
Public Domain.

Cosmas Indicopleustes, a Greek merchant (and later hermit) who lived in Alexandria during the sixth century, passed through Sinai on his way to India in 535 CE, and he saw inscriptions carved on rocks in the vicinity of Mount Serbal. Cosmas thought the inscriptions were the work of the Israelites fleeing bondage, "miraculously preserved as testimonies to the truth of the Mosaic narrative" (Schaff 1878: 186). However, this now seems unlikely. During the early Christian era, *anchorites* (secluded Christians, or hermits) built granite dwellings on Mount Serbal, thinking it was Mount Sinai. The anchorites carved Greek and Hebrew inscriptions on rocks at the



foot of Serbal, identifying possible locations described in the Biblical stories. For this reason, the pathways at the bottom of Mount Serbal are often called *wadi mukattab* (an Arabic term meaning "valley of writing" or "valley of inscriptions"). Francis Frith photographed the valley of writing and rock carvings (fig. 28), but he took no position on whether Serbal or Horeb was the Biblical Mount Sinai.

In Frith's photograph of Mount Horeb (fig. 29), he captured its awesome verticality and suggested its scale by placing a relatively diminutive local man in the central foreground (fig. 30). The man in Frith's picture serves as a singular substitute for the masses of ancient Israelites escaping from bondage, as described in the book of Exodus and represented in imaginative illustrations, such as those of Jean-Léon Gérôme or J. M. W. Turner (figs. 6, 12). Whether in fanciful artwork or in realistic photographs, Mount Sinai continued to evoke wonder and inspire creativity.



Figure 29  
Francis Frith,  
*Mount Horeb, Sinai*, 1857.  
Public Domain.



Figure 30  
Detail of figure 29.

## 10. Concluding statement

Although Mount Sinai's remote, stony peaks lie "off the beaten path," far from the ancient overland trade routes linking Africa and Asia, it played an inordinate role in religious history and in art history. Mount Sinai was critical to the development of Judaism and Christianity and, therefore, Europeans from the ancient days onward exhibited special reverence for the site. In the nineteenth century, a steady stream of European intellectuals, pilgrims, and artists poured into the region, intent on documenting the *Mountain of Moses*, the *Mountain of God*. This brief essay presented only a few of the more prominent (mainly British) artists who portrayed Mount Sinai. A more complete survey remains to be written, incorporating other historical periods and the art of non-Europeans. The goal of this initial sketch is to direct the attention of students and scholars to a limited, yet multifaceted, visual record, and to encourage more research.

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