

**James K. Hoffmeier, *Ancient Israel in Sinai: The evidence for the Authenticity of the Wilderness Tradition*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2005, 384pp, maps and plates, US\$45, ISBN 0195155467.**

Reviewed by Christopher Davey

Professor Hoffmeier's earlier work, *Israel in Egypt* (1996) established a methodological and an evidential background which he develops further in this latest study. As readers of *Israel in Egypt* will know Hoffmeier is well qualified for his subject as a scholar in Egyptology and the Ancient Near East. James Hoffmeier is Professor of Near Eastern History and Archaeology at Trinity International University, Deerfield, Illinois. He was Project Director of the Eastern Frontier Canal Survey in 1994 and since 1999 the Director of the Tell el-Borg excavations in Northern Sinai. (<http://www.tellelborg.org/index.htm>). The personal background of the author gives this book and some of its conclusions a standing that will remain relevant well beyond the reviews of material that it contains.

Hoffmeier does not allow himself to be bound by 'anthropological and sociological models and subjective theories about the dating and origin of the biblical documents' and instead examines and follows the evidence. In this new book he adopts a phenomenological approach which is descriptive, comparative, empirical and where investigation is done in the context of history itself. Above all, it suspends judgement on the phenomenon so as not to import bias and limitation. As a result the conclusions are often 'on balance' assessments and leave the field open for additional evidence.

After surveying the wilderness tradition in the history and religion of ancient Israel and in modern scholarship, Hoffmeier discusses the geography and environment of Sinai. He concludes that the place names associated with the Sea of Reeds (Ex 14:2) refer to a specific location and that they correspond best to the Egyptian toponyms of the thirteenth century B.C. In his view, archaeological discoveries of the last fifteen years in north Sinai render it no longer plausible to claim a sixth century milieu for the Exodus story. The paleoenvironmental and archaeological data leads him to conclude that the geographical setting for Exodus 14 is 'between the north side of the el-Ballah Lake system and the southern tip of the eastern lagoon'.

The discussion about the location of 'the Mountain of God' begins with an analysis of the Wilderness itineraries and the possible corresponding geography. North and central Sinai have no reasonable candidates for Mount Sinai. There is a lengthy assessment of outside Sinai theories including those presented by Professor Colin Humphreys (2003). He finds Humphreys' use of the Exodus itinerary problematic as the data is forced into a preconceived route. The proposed mountains in Arabia do not in Hoffmeier's view correspond with the distances or the geographic and

toponymic data. The most viable candidates are located in Southern Sinai and are Gebel Safsafah and Gebel Serbal.

The treatment of the journey from Egypt to Mt Sinai begins with a discussion of the numbers of people involved and Hoffmeier accepts Mendenhall's view that '*elep* is a clan-based military unit rather than a 'thousand' (1958) so that there were only tens of thousands of Israelites. Hoffmeier uses earlier scholarship to trace the route to Mt Sinai commenting on timing, seasons and sustenance. He considers the route to be tentative, but plausible.

The possibility of the Israelites writing legislation is considered in relation to the origins of the Semitic alphabet and the form of contemporary Ancient Near Eastern treaties. Hoffmeier agrees with Kitchen (1993) that the tabernacle's design and construction was based on Egyptian technology pointing to a Bronze Age rather than exilic date. Many of the words associated with the tabernacle's construction, furnishing and operation are connected to Egyptian etymology and motifs have Egyptian prototypes. Hoffmeier is not the first to draw these conclusions but he has assembled more evidence than has been previously gathered.

A chapter is devoted to the Egyptian nature of personal names and to other Egyptian elements in the Wilderness tradition. The final chapter discusses the relationship between the Wilderness tradition and the origin of Israel. Hoffmeier takes the view that Israel entered Canaan from the outside rather than developing indigenously. The origin of the divine name is seen to derive from the Sinai as it has no parallels in Egypt, and the debate about the Karnak Temple scenes now attributed to Merneptah showing prisoners that may be Israelites is explained without a conclusion being reached.

In concluding Hoffmeier finds it implausible that an exilic period writer could have constructed a narrative so dependent upon second millennium Egyptian culture, and why would one try doing so as no one at the time would have known the difference in any case. To jettison the wilderness tradition in Hoffmeier's view leaves too many unanswered questions about ancient Israel's origin, religion, law, and the divine name, Yahweh.

While the book is a documented scholarly work it is readable and should not present a challenge to the non-specialist. The pictures, taken by Hoffmeier himself, set the scene well. He has photographs of all the 'Mount Sinai contenders' in the southern Sinai, allowing the reader to appreciate the points made in the text. The maps are satisfactory, but are not detailed enough to complement the discussion about the wilderness itineraries. This may partly be a result of the uncertainties that Hoffmeier concedes remain with our understanding of them.

It almost appears that Hoffmeier has left the next stage of Israelite tradition from Mt Sinai to 'the promised land' as the subject for a further book, maybe to complete a trilogy. The period covered by this book is placed directly in the area of Hoffmeier's field of study and current field

work. His capacity to discuss issues in terms of the meaning on the ground is unparalleled especially in relation to the crossing of the 'sea of reeds', which he places in the vicinity of his excavations at Tell el-Borg. The reliability of his field work and particularly the paleoenvironmental and geomorphological analysis will have to await publication more comprehensive than that available on the excavation's website. However for some time to come no one will be able to consider the wilderness tradition without reference to this study.

#### Bibliography:

Hoffmeier, James K. 1996 *Israel in Egypt: The evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Humphreys, Colin J. 2003 *The Miracles of Exodus*, San Francisco: Harper Collins.

Kitchen, Kenneth 1993 The Tabernacle – a Bronze Age Artifact, *Eretz Israel* 24, 119-129.

Mendenhall, George E. 1958 The Census Lists of Number 1 and 26, *JBL* 77, 52-66.

**Shimon Gibson, *The Cave of John the Baptist: The Stunning Archaeological Discovery that has Redefined Christian History*, New York: Doubleday, 2004, 400pp, maps, figures, plates, US\$17, ISBN 0385503474 (Hb);**

***The Cave of John the Baptist: The first archaeological evidence of the historical reality of the Gospel story*, London: Arrow Books, 2005, A\$28, ISBN 009942648X (Pb).**

Reviewed by Christopher Davey

When studying archaeology one of my lectures stated to my surprise that archaeologists are really in the entertainment industry. He meant that if public are not interested in what archaeologists do, funding will evaporate and it will be necessary to get a job not so dependent on people's curiosity.

It is not easy to keep people interested and at the same time be intellectually honest as archaeology can be downright boring, especially at the beginning of an excavation when funds are often desperately short. Speculation may spice up the situation and may not be a problem when one is expounding the significance of archaeological material in the context of personal interest, how people once lived and died, but step into the realm of history and in particular religious history and issues will become contentious.

There is a tradition of British archaeologists writing popular books describing their work. Layard and Kenyon are two such archaeologists. Gibson also comes out of the British

archaeological world and is associated with the Palestine Exploration Society. He appears to be a genuine and careful archaeologist. But there is a very real question about the lengths that this book, or at least the cover, goes to gain attention.

The title of the book ensured a good level of interest in the 'Di Vinci code' world and sales have borne this out. However many readers with expectations fostered by the title and blurb will close the book wondering what it was all about. Gibson's book after all reports on a professional excavation of a late Iron Age cistern located near Ain Karim west of Jerusalem that had some rather indistinct drawings on the wall. It does not seem to be the stuff that will change the course of Christian history.

Press releases issued during the excavations claimed that the place where John the Baptist lived had been found. After such hype, it is hard to write a popular book unless the excitement is maintained. However the connection of John the Baptist with this site remains highly speculative.

Gibson discusses the church and biblical traditions associated with John the Baptist, and describes related archaeological and ecclesiastical sites. The Biblical material will be familiar to most readers of the Bible, but the development of church traditions may not and it is these that occupy a significant portion of the book.

Gibson's venture into John the Baptist's theology and significance assumes that his importance was diminished by Jesus' disciples and the traditions of the Christian church, and that his theological meaning was modified so as not to conflict with the Church's view of Jesus. The suggestion that John saw himself as Elisha waiting for Elijah will not gain much support. His ideas at this point are superficial and lead one to conclude that he is probably a good archaeologist.

While the treatment of John by Church tradition is criticised, the reader has to be interested enough in such traditions to read numerous chapters about them. This aspect of the book is heavy going, something that is compounded by the suspicion that Gibson is himself in unfamiliar territory.

The arrangement of the book is rather frustrating. Figures do not have captions, only a number referring to a list at the front of the book, so that with endnotes at the back one needs to have the book open at three places much of the time. The endnotes are useful, but not comprehensive. The drawings of the cave itself are small and do not give the reader a feel for the structure. The colour photographs and line drawings are helpful, but maps are limited leaving much of the geographical context, an important issue for the study, to the imagination.

While the book will probably sink without trace, one hopes that the cave itself will be the subject of a careful archaeological publication. Such an enterprise takes time, but it is something that British archaeologists have been good at.