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THE ASCENT OF SINAI

Egeria, a Spanish or Gallic pilgrim who traveled to the Holy Land in 381-384, sent a lengthy account of her journey to a circle of women back home. Her detailed narrative was later mentioned by Valerius, a 7th-century Galician monk, who identifies Egeria as a nun. Her letter, now called *Itinerarium Egeriae*, or “The Travels of Egeria,” was presumed lost until 1884, when portions of it were discovered copied into an 11th-century manuscript, the Codex Aretinus, belonging to a monastic library in Arezzo, Italy.

Of special note is Egeria’s account of 4th-century monks who lived in cells at the base of Mount Sinai, near the Burning Bush. The belief that this was the original Burning Bush was a well-established tradition long before Egeria’s pilgrimage, and in our own time, the longevity of such flowering desert bushes is well-established. Since 1980, botanists have believed that the oldest living thing on earth is a Creosote bush (*Larrea tridentate*) in California’s Mohave Desert, estimated to be 11,700 years old. The flowering bush reproduces by cloning itself, leaving the older parts to die away. Following are portions of Egeria’s account of her visit to Sinai.

We reached the mountain late on the Sabbath, and arriving at a certain monastery, the monks who dwelt there received us very kindly, showing us every kindness; there is also a church and a priest there. We stayed there that night, and early on the Lord’s Day, together with the priest and the monks who dwelt there, we began the ascent of the mountains one by one. These mountains are ascended with infinite toil, for you cannot go up gently by a spiral track, as we say snail-shell wise, but you climb straight up the whole way, as if up a wall, and you must come straight down each mountain until you reach the very foot of the middle one, which is specially called Sinai.

By this way, then, at the bidding of Christ our God, and helped by the prayers of the holy men who accompanied us, we arrived at the fourth hour, at the summit of Sinai, the holy mountain of God, where the law was given, that is, at the place where the Glory of the Lord descended on the day when the mountain smoked. Thus the toil was great, for I had to go up on foot, the ascent being impossible in the saddle, and yet I did not feel the toil, on the

Opposite: The northeast corner of the monastery. Behind the cross over the Chapel of the Forty Martyrs of Sinai can be seen the Burning Bush.

side of the ascent. I say, the toil, because I realized that the desire which I had was being fulfilled at God's bidding. In that place there is now a church, not great in size, for the place itself, that is the summit of the mountain, is not very great; nevertheless, the church itself is great in grace.

When, therefore, at God's bidding, we had arrived at the summit, and had reached the door of the church, lo, the priest who was appointed to the church came from his cell and met us, a hale old man, a monk from early life, and an ascetic as they say here, in short one worthy to be in that place; the other priests also met us, together with all the monks who dwelt on the



The Burning Bush at noon.

mountain, that is, not hindered by age or infirmity. No one, however, dwells on the very summit of the central mountain; there is nothing there excepting only the church and the cave where holy Moses was.

When the whole passage from the book of Moses had been read in that place, and when the oblation had been duly made, at which we communicated, and as we were coming out of the church, the priests of the place gave us *eulogiae*, that is, of fruits which grow on the mountain. For although the holy mountain Sinai is rocky throughout, so that it has not even a shrub on it, yet down below, near the foot of the mountains, around either the central height or those which encircle it, there is a little plot of

ground where the holy monks diligently plant little trees and orchards, and set up oratories with cells near to them, so that they may gather fruits which they have evidently cultivated with their own hands from the soil of the very mountain itself.

So, after we had communicated, and the holy men had given us *eulogiae*, and we had come out of the door of the church, I began to ask them to show us the several sites. Thereupon the holy men immediately deigned to show us the various places. They showed us the cave where holy Moses was when he had gone up again into the mount of God, that he might receive the second tables after he had broken the former ones when the people sinned; they also deigned to show us the other sites which we desired to see, and those which they themselves well knew. But I would have you to know, ladies, reverend

sisters, that from the place where we were standing, round outside the walls of the church, that is from the summit of the central mountain, those mountains, which we could scarcely climb at first, seemed to be so much below us when compared with the central one on which we were standing, that they appeared to be little hills, although they were so very great that I thought that I had never seen higher, except that this central one excelled them by far. From thence we saw Egypt and Palestine, and the Red Sea and the Parthenian Sea, which leads to Alexandria and the boundless territories of the Saracens, all so much below us as to be scarcely credible, but the holy men pointed out each one of them to us.

The Burning Bush

... And now it began to be about the eighth hour, and there were still three miles left before we could get out of the mountains which we had entered late on the previous day; we had not, however, to go out on the same side by which we had entered, as I said above, because it was necessary that we should walk past and see all the holy places and the cells that were there, and thus come out at the head of the valley ... that lies under the mount of God. It was necessary for us to come out at the head of the valley, because there were very many cells of holy men there, and a church in the place where the bush is, which same bush is alive to this day and throws out shoots. So having made the whole descent of the mount of God we arrived at the bush about the tenth hour. This is that bush which I mentioned above, out of which the Lord spake in the fire to Moses, and the same is situated at that spot at the head of the valley where there are many cells and a church. There is a very pleasant garden in front of the church, containing excellent and abundant water, and the bush itself is in this garden. The spot is also shown hard by where holy Moses stood when God said to him: *Loose the latchet of thy shoe*, and the rest. Now it was about the tenth hour when we had arrived at the place, and so, as it was late, we could not make the oblation, but prayer was made in the church and also at the bush in the garden, and the passage from the book of Moses was read according to custom. Then, as it was late, we took a meal with the holy men at a place in the garden before the bush; we stayed there also, and next day, rising very early, we asked the priests that the oblation should be made there, which was done... ✦

Translated by M.L.McClure and C. L. Feltoe, London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1919.