

Yesterday I responded to a reader of the blog who wanted me to repeat a post from a few years ago about my visit to St. Catherine's Monastery at the foot of Mount Sinai, the famed place where Moses allegedly received the Ten Commandments. The full story took two posts, and here is now the second, where I explain one of the most memorable experiences of my travels.

In my last post I began to relate an anecdote about a traveling adventure I had several years ago, when giving lectures for a UNC trip to Egypt and Jordan with a stop at the famed St. Catherine's monastery in the southern part of the Sinai peninsula, the place where

Tischendorf had discovered the biblical manuscript codex Sinaiticus in the mid 19th century, and where a fire at the monastery in the 1970s had uncovered a hidden room found to contain manuscripts, including the pages from the Old Testament of the codex Sinaiticus that Tischendorf had not come away with from the monastery when he took the bulk of the manuscript with him back to Russian. (That is the longest sentence I've ever produced on the blog; it's because I'm reading Proust right now....)

For me, one of the highlights of this trip was to be a visit to the monastery, a place that I had wanted to see for years. It is located in a completely barren location in the wilderness and is the one and only thing to see in the entire region. It's not the kind of place that you can take in while seeing other regional sites. There aren't any regional sites. And so we had one day set aside to see the monastery while heading up north on a cruise on the Gulf of Aqaba, traveling toward Jordan where we were scheduled to go to Petra.

And then something really disappointing happened. As I said, the monastery has thousands of visitors ever year. But as it turns out, on this particular day (because we had been unexpectedly delayed for unrelated reasons), the tour guide for the trip learned, it was to be closed to outsiders. There was an orthodox religious holiday. Ugh. That one day was one of the major reasons I had wanted to go on the trip.

As it turns out, along with the UNC alumni on the trip there were other alumni groups doing the same itinerary, so we all mingled together (there may have been something like 50-60 of us altogether?). The largest group was from the University of Texas at Austin. If you'll remember, the only non-Greek monk at the monastery was Father Justin, himself a graduate of UT Austin. The tour guide knew this, and got in touch with him (over email I suppose). She explained the situation, that she had a group of alums from Texas with her, and they would very much like to see the monastery, but this was their only chance. Could he somehow arrange to allow us to see it even though it was closed?

He agreed. In fact, he said he would give us a private tour. Wow.

We went to the monastery and met up with him. I met him one on one, and as it turns out he knew very well my mentor, Bruce Metzger, and we had a nice talk about scholarship on the manuscripts of the New Testament. The monastery not only had once housed the codex Sinaiticus, but also other manuscripts of the Bible, one other that was also famous: a Syriac manuscript of the Gospels discovered in the late 19th century by two British women - twin sisters, whose story can be found in the intriguing book [Sisters of Sinai: How Two Lady Adventurers found the Hidden Gospels](#) - a manuscript still in the monastery. And so he and I had a very nice private conversation about the holdings of the monastery library.

Unfortunately, the library was under renovation as they were modernizing it for temperature and humidity control. So we couldn't see it on our tour. But Father Justin graciously showed us all around the rest of the place (we even saw the Burning Bush, which, luckily, was no longer burning) along with the very nice little museum they have that displayed some of the monastery's icons and manuscripts (including the Syriac Gospels manuscript discovered by the twins, tucked away in a corner display). It was a very interesting and enlightening tour, of the oldest continuously-functioning monastery in the Christian world.

When the tour was over, we were heading off to have lunch, and Father Justin beckoned to me. He wanted to say something to me in private. We huddled together as everyone else went off, and he said he wanted to show me something.

He unlocked the door into the library undergoing renovation, took me through the place, up a set of dark stairs; he unlocked a door at the top and into a room filled with boxes piled up, with a table in the middle that had a large relatively flat box on it. He took me to the box, and lifted the top off, and there, inside, was a manuscript.

Father Justin didn't say anything, he was just smiling. Oh my God. I said, That's Codex Sinaiticus!! He said, yes it is! It was the remaining leaves from codex Sinaiticus, the ones that Tischendorf had not taken away with him, the ones discovered in the 1970s. Right there in front of my eyes. Unprotected. Simply sitting in this box.

This portion was pages from the book of Numbers in the Old Testament. Father Justin pointed to the beginning of a section on the top page; it was the story of Balaam's ass.

For me this was flat out amazing. I had known about this manuscript for over thirty years. It was the most famous manuscript of the Bible in the world. And here it was in all its glory, sitting on the table.

We looked at the manuscript for a few minutes and he explained to me some of its striking features, before he had to take me back down to rejoin the group. But it was an amazing few minutes, the absolute highlight of my trip, and probably my most memorable moment from any of the trips abroad I've taken.



[How a Book Gets Its Title](#)

[Visiting the Monastery at Mount Sinai: A Blast From the Past](#)