

Places in the Parasha

Biblical Geography and Its Meaning



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Yoel Elitzur

PLACES IN THE PARASHA
BIBLICAL GEOGRAPHY
AND ITS MEANING

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Daniel Landman

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Places in the Parasha
Biblical Geography and Its Meaning

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*Dedicated in loving memory of
John Alexander Franks, z"l
יעקב בן משה ז"ל
Husband, father, grandfather,
solicitor, collector, scholar, writer*



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Foreword

If you seek it as you do silver and search for it as for [buried] treasures, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and attain knowledge of God. (Prov. 2:4–5)

When learning Tanakh with the literary-theological method,¹ certain elements become primary. Others lend themselves less to this type of analysis and religious exploration. To cite a familiar example, one learning the Book of Joshua likely will focus on the gripping narratives of chapters 1–12 and then skip to chapters 22–24. Joshua’s role as leader and his relationship to Moses’ leadership, the balance between God’s intervention and human efforts, the reenactment of the covenant, the thorny question of war against the Canaanites, and many other vital religious and human issues dominate the discussion. The lengthy city lists in chapters 13–21 would receive scant attention at best, perhaps a few scattered bullet points. Further, the classical commentators do not offer extensive help expanding the middle chapters, since they generally were unaware of the geography of the Land of Israel.

1. See especially Shalom Carmy, “A Room with a View, but a Room of Our Own,” in *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah: Contributions and Limitations*, ed. Shalom Carmy (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1996), 1–38; Hayyim Angel, “The Literary-Theological Study of Tanakh,” afterword to Moshe Sokolow, *Tanakh: An Owner’s Manual: Authorship, Canonization, Masoretic Text, Exegesis, Modern Scholarship and Pedagogy* (Brooklyn, NY: Ktav, 2015), 192–207.

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Now imagine an entire book about those city list chapters, written by an expert in both the text of Tanakh and contemporary historical and archaeological scholarship. Imagine that book teaching a rigorous methodology in a clear accessible way that enlightens our understanding of Tanakh and strengthens our religious connection to the Land of Israel. Such a book would fill a monumental void in our learning. You are holding that book.

Professor Yoel Elitzur has made a remarkable contribution to religious Tanakh study precisely by focusing on the oft-neglected biblical places and names. Prof. Elitzur, who taught Tanakh for many years at Herzog College of Yeshivat Har Etzion and at Hebrew University, not only believes in the sanctity of Tanakh. He takes its historical relevance seriously.² Following in the venerable footsteps of his father and teacher, Professor Yehuda Elitzur, *z"l* (1911–1997), Prof. Yoel Elitzur combines cutting-edge academic research with careful text analysis, bringing both together with rigor and religious passion.

One must wait until page 431 of this volume to hear Prof. Elitzur's assessment of his contribution:

This is a lonely task, as the classical commentators were not familiar with the land or with the extrabiblical sources, and many God-fearing students today who take interest in these matters believe that they should not pursue information or sources that were beyond the purview of the classical commentators. On the other hand, most scholars of biblical geography and history do not pay attention to what the Tanakh says about itself... We will read the Tanakh as it is written and attempt to understand what exactly it is saying, with the help of all the historical, geographical, archaeological, and linguistic tools available to us.

2. For a particularly instructive example, Prof. Elitzur insists that the Pharaoh at the time of the Exodus was not Ramesses II, based on his acceptance of the chronological signpost in I Kings 6:1, which states that Solomon built the Temple 480 years from the Exodus (pp. 143–55).

This volume provides the serious religious student of Tanakh with information and methodology that impact on many aspects of learning. In this foreword, I cite several representative examples of the types of contributions he makes.

In his study of *Parashat Bereshit*, Prof. Elitzur explores the role of the Euphrates River in Tanakh (pp. 6–10). One noteworthy point is his analysis of I Kings 5:4, which states that King Solomon “controlled the whole region beyond the River, from Tiphseh to Gaza.” In this verse, “beyond the River” clearly refers to the west of the Euphrates, where Israel is located. This verse, argues Prof. Elitzur, reflects a later geographical perspective introduced by the Assyrians (first evidenced in the writings of Sargon II, 722–705 BCE), who referred to the western nations of the Assyrian Empire as *eber nari*. Prior to the rise of the Assyrian Empire, Israel’s original perspective is that we are “here,” and “beyond the River” refers to nations *east* of the Euphrates (see Josh. 24:2–15; II Sam. 10:16). After the rise of the Assyrian Empire, Israel adopted the Assyrian-centric perspective and referred to the Land of Israel as “beyond the River,” that is, *west* of the Euphrates.³ This later point of reference appears thirteen times in the Book of Ezra. Returning to the verse pertaining to King Solomon’s reign, it appears that this perspective reflects the time of the later prophetic author (traditionally Jeremiah; see Bava Batra 15a), rather than the time of Solomon, who ruled prior to the eighth century BCE. In Solomon’s time, the Israelites would not yet have referred to the Land of Israel as “beyond the River.”

Prof. Elitzur does not often engage in direct “know how to answer the heretic” (Mishna Avot 2:14) polemic. On occasion, however, he brings biblical and archaeological evidence to bear when there are popular misconceptions based on a misunderstanding of either the biblical text or archaeology. In his analysis of the proper identification of the Ai (pp. 18–36), for example, Prof. Elitzur surveys the biblical evidence for clues on locating the city vis-à-vis Bethel. It

3. Prof. Elitzur notes the parallel to contemporary people living in the “Middle East” (synonymous with the “Near East”) also referring to their lands as the Middle East, adopting the Eurocentric perspective of that term.

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should be located just east of Bethel. And indeed, just over one mile east of Bethel's probable location, a large tell was discovered. Known by Arabs as Khirbet et-Tell (the ruins of the tell), it appeared to be the perfect location to unearth Ai. In the 1930s, analysis of archaeological findings suggested that et-Tell was a highly fortified city that was destroyed by fire in approximately 2100 BCE, long before Abraham. After that, the city lay in ruins except for a brief period prior to the founding of Israel's monarchy when an unfortified village was settled on top of the destroyed city. The scholarly conclusion, therefore, was that Joshua would have found an uninhabited city in ruins. Although this conclusion cast doubt on the veracity of the battle account in the Book of Joshua (chs. 7–8), Prof. Elitzur argues that even a superficial reading of the biblical passages illustrates that the Ai was a tiny town. Et-Tell, in contrast, reveals a large city. In all likelihood, et-Tell is *not* the location of the biblical Ai. The biblical Ai would be somewhere else in the vicinity of Khirbet et-Tell, and has not yet been unearthed in archaeological digs. Thus, there is no conflict between the biblical account and the current state of archaeological scholarship.

In his essay on *Parashat Vayishlah* (pp. 84–95), Prof. Elitzur weighs in on a controversy surrounding the traditional site of Joseph's tomb in Shechem, which was vandalized by Arabs in 1996 and again in 2000. In the 1980s and '90s, several Israelis, often motivated by their political viewpoints, asserted through various media that this gravesite was merely a tomb of a Muslim Sheikh named Yusuf who lived some two hundred years ago. Prof. Elitzur responds that the site has been known and venerated for thousands of years. He surveys ancient and medieval writings that identify the site, and couples that with an analysis of archaeological findings to support his conclusion.

Prof. Elitzur is equally equipped to debunk unfounded folk traditions. A recent Jewish tradition marks two graves near Zorah as those of Samson and his father Manoah. This identification, however, is specious (p. 422). Samson was buried "*between Zorah and Eshtaol*" (Judges 16:31), whereas these two graves are adjacent to Zorah itself.

Prof. Elitzur even ventures occasionally into the realm of halakha. For example, cities surrounded by walls at the time of Joshua must observe Purim on the fifteenth day of Adar. What cities were surrounded

by walls at that time? Prof. Elitzur provides archaeological evidence to contribute to this discussion (pp. 373–85).

In his study on *Parashat Masei* (pp. 531–52), Prof. Elitzur examines a halakhic debate between Rambam and Ramban. Rambam follows the talmudic ruling that all forty-eight Levite cities served as cities of refuge. Ramban adopts the plain sense of the texts of the Torah and the Book of Joshua and insists that only six Levite cities served as cities of refuge.

Rather than simply concluding that Ramban is closer to the plain sense of the Torah and Joshua, Prof. Elitzur observes that in the parallel list of Levite cities in I Chronicles 6, there is a different formulation from the list in Joshua. For example, the Book of Joshua lists Hebron as a Levite city that became a city of refuge: “But to the descendants of Aaron the priest they assigned Hebron – the city of refuge for manslayers – together with its pastures, Libnah with its pastures, Jattir with its pastures, Eshtemoa with its pastures...” (Josh. 21:13–14). It is clear that Hebron is the city of refuge, and the other Levite cities are not cities of refuge. Ramban has *peshat*.

Contrast the parallel passage in Chronicles: “To the sons of Aaron they gave the cities of refuge: Hebron and Libnah with its pasturelands, Jattir and Eshtemoa with its pasturelands...” (I Chr. 6:42). This passage uses the term *cities* of refuge, suggesting that *all* of these Levite cities served as cities of refuge. Rambam has *peshat*!

The same contrast between city and cities occurs with Shechem:

They were given, in the hill country of Ephraim, Shechem – the city of refuge for manslayers – with its pastures, Gezer with its pastures... (Josh. 21:21)

They gave them the *cities* of refuge: Shechem with its pasturelands in the hill country of Ephraim, Gezer with its pasturelands... (I Chr. 6:52)

Prof. Elitzur suggests that Chronicles reflects the reality in a later period, when all Levite cities served as cities of refuge based on a special

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enactment or custom. He quotes several relevant rabbinic and other ancient sources to support this thesis. In the final analysis, Ramban reflects *peshat* in the Torah and Joshua, which was likely the original law. Ramban reflects *peshat* in Chronicles, which was likely the law followed some generations later.

My favorite analyses encompass several essays that explore the correlation between enthusiastic desire to inherit the Land of Israel and the inheritance of that land. In his essay on *Parashat Pinhas* (pp. 502–14), Prof. Elitzur explores a curious feature regarding the inheritance of the daughters of Tzlofhad. Because Manasseh and Ephraim were born in Egypt, we do not learn of their family branches until the census in the fortieth year of the wilderness:

These were the descendants of Gilead: [Of] Iezer, the clan of the Iezerites; of Helek, the clan of the Helekites; [of] Asriel, the clan of the Asrielites; [of] Shechem, the clan of the Shechemites; [of] Shemida, the clan of the Shemidaites; [of] Hephher, the clan of the Hephherites. (Num. 26:31–33)

In sum, there are six family branches in Manasseh. The daughters of Tzlofhad are the granddaughters of Hephher, and presumably would split the portion that would have been assigned to Tzlofhad son of Hephher.

When the Book of Joshua describes the tribal inheritance of Manasseh, however, it identifies ten districts instead of the expected six:

And this is the portion that fell by lot to the tribe of Manasseh ... The descendants of Abiezer, Helek, Asriel, Shechem, Hephher, and Shemida ... Now Tzlofhad son of Hephher son of Gilead son of Machir son of Manasseh had no sons, but only daughters ... So, in accordance with the Lord's instructions, they were granted a portion among their father's kinsmen. *Ten districts* fell to Manasseh ... as Manasseh's daughters inherited a portion together with his sons, while the land of Gilead was assigned to the rest of Manasseh's descendants. (Josh. 17:1–6)

From the simple reading of these verses, the five daughters of Tzlofhad each became independent districts in Manasseh, instead of simply all becoming part of Hephher's district! Why should they become their own districts, equal to those of their grandfather's generation? Prof. Elitzur quotes a midrashic resolution, that Tzlofhad amassed a total of five portions that he then bequeathed to his daughters. Alternatively, Malbim proposes that the ten districts in Manasseh are actually ten geographic portions not connected to the family tree.

However, it is far smoother to say that the daughters of Tzlofhad became independent districts. To support his reading, Prof. Elitzur quotes from the Samaria Ostraca that were discovered in 1910 in the treasury of the palace of the kings of Israel in ancient Samaria. Fifteen place names and seven clans appear in these documents. The seven clans are Shemida, Abiezer, Helek, [A]sriel, Shechem, Hogleh, and Noah. Hogleh and Noah were two of Tzlofhad's daughters. These districts were named after the family members, just as reported in Joshua 17. Evidently, the singular enthusiasm to inherit land displayed by the daughters of Tzlofhad elevated their rank within their tribe so that they ultimately received their own districts, unlike any of their male cousins from that generation.

In his essay on *Parashat Matot* (pp. 515–30), Prof. Elitzur continues the theme of the special enthusiasm to inherit the land exhibited by the tribe of Manasseh. He asks two basic questions: (1) Why does the half-tribe of Manasseh appear in Numbers 32 only as an afterthought? Why were they not included with Reuben and Gad from the beginning of their request of the eastern lands of Sihon and Og? (2) After the Israelites defeated Sihon, why did they then march north to confront Og in the Bashan (Num. 21:33)? They already had a clear entry path into the Land of Israel!

While yet in Egypt, the tribe of Manasseh named some of its children Gilead, Hephher, Shechem, and Tirzah. These are place-names in Manasseh's territory on both sides of the Jordan. These names expressed the wish of the tribe to return to their homeland, and evidently Manasseh

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considered territory on both sides of the Jordan home already during the nation's sojourn in Egypt.⁴

Building on the medieval rabbinic suggestions of a student of Rabbi Saadia Gaon and Rabbi Yehuda the Pious, Prof. Elitzur proposes that while the nation was still in Egypt, certain families from Manasseh settled parts of the Bashan. Throughout Israel's enslavement in Egypt, these Manassites remained in that territory and were there when Moses and the majority of the nation returned from Egypt. This hypothesis also accounts for the population explosion in Manasseh from the first year (32,200; see Num. 1:35) to the fortieth year (52,700; see Num. 26:34). Those who had left Egypt were joined by those living in Bashan.

Moses and the nation therefore marched north to Bashan, to greet and liberate their "sabra" brethren of Manasseh from the rule of Og. These Manassites also had nothing to do with Moses' deal with Reuben and Gad, since this land belonged to them from beforehand. The tribe of Manasseh earned this additional territory as a consequence of their enthusiasm to inherit the land.

Unlike the exceptional enthusiasm to inherit the land exhibited by the tribe of Manasseh, the tribe of Dan represents the opposite extreme. In his study of *Parashat Naso* (pp. 421–38), Prof. Elitzur explains that the tribe of Dan was lax in taking possession of the land, thereby squandering their assigned territory and forcing many of their members to find additional land to the north of Israel.

To support this thesis, Prof. Elitzur observes that the cities of Zorah and Eshtaol typically are associated with Dan. Samson, who hailed from the tribe of Dan, was active between these towns (Judges 13:25) and later was buried between these towns (16:31). Members of the tribe of Dan ventured from there to find new territory for Dan to occupy, and eventually conquered Laish in the north (18:2, 8, 11).

4. In a similar vein, Prof. Elitzur (p. 165) observes that Moses' father Amram had a brother named Hebron (Ex. 6:18). Evidently, Hebron was named in Egypt after the city to express a profound longing for the people to return to the land of the Patriarchs. Once Joshua and the people entered Israel, this dream was fulfilled as Hebron became a Levite city and a city of refuge.

In the Book of Joshua, however, Zorah and Eshtaol are identified *both* with Judah and with Dan. With Judah: “In the Lowland: Eshtaol, Zorah, Ashnah...” (Josh. 15:33). With Dan: “Their allotted territory comprised: Zorah, Eshtaol, Ir-shemesh...” (19:41). To whom did these towns belong?

Although Dan was a large tribe, it was unable to conquer or hold land:

But the territory of the Danites slipped from their grasp. So the Danites migrated and made war on Leshem. They captured it and put it to the sword; they took possession of it and settled in it. And they changed the name of Leshem to Dan, after their ancestor Dan. (Josh. 19:47)

The Amorites pressed the Danites into the hill country; they would not let them come down to the plain. (Judges 1:34)

Further, the description of Dan’s portion in Joshua chapter 19 is a list of cities, with no clearly defined borders. Prof. Elitzur explains this phenomenon by noting that the tribes of Judah, Ephraim, and Manasseh were quick to inherit their land and also dispossessed Canaanites from the surrounding regions. Consequently, they obtained this additional land.

Joshua supported the expansion of the tribes of Judah and Joseph, and encouraged the less active tribes to follow their lead:

But there remained seven tribes of the Israelites which had not yet received their portions. So Joshua said to the Israelites, “How long will you be slack about going and taking possession of the land which the Lord, the God of your fathers, has assigned to you? Appoint three men of each tribe; I will send them out to go opposes of apportionment, and then come back to me. They shall divide it into seven parts – Judah shall remain by its territory in the south, and the house of Joseph shall remain by its territory in the north.” (Josh. 18:2–5)

By the time the tribe of Dan decided to become active, there was little territory left available for them. The tribes of Judah and Ephraim therefore

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allotted cities to them, without any contiguous land borders. We see a similar phenomenon with the tribe of Simeon, which occupied cities within the boundaries of Judah.

To round out this discussion, Prof. Elitzur surveys the varying accounts of the borders of the Land of Israel in his study on *Parashat Mishpatim* (pp. 208–19). There appear to be two different sets of borders enumerated. One border stretches all the way from the Euphrates to the River of Egypt or the Red Sea (e.g., Gen. 15:18; Ex. 23:31), and other borders that are smaller and do not stretch to the Euphrates or the Red Sea (e.g., Num. ch. 34). The history of Israel is based on the smaller borders, since the people are not considered to be in Israel immediately after crossing the Red Sea.

The smaller borders represent the first stage of the biblical program, as Israel's population would not have been large enough to settle in the greater borders. Joshua was tasked with conquering a territorial nucleus so that the nation could begin its life in the Land of Israel. The larger borders represent “potential holiness,” that a religious and enthusiastic nation would be able to settle and sanctify over time.

Prof. Elitzur shines his spotlight on the oft-neglected areas of Tanakh. His approach calls to mind Ramban's words in his commentary on Genesis 35:16. The verse reads, “They set out from Bethel; but when they were still some distance short of Ephrath (*vayhi od kivrat haaretz lavo Efrata*), Rachel was in childbirth, and she had hard labor.” Ramban composed his commentary in Spain, and he adopted Radak's interpretation of “when they were still some distance short” to mean the distance one may walk from morning until mealtime.

Toward the end of his life, however, Ramban moved to *Eretz Yisrael*, and updated this comment:

That is what I wrote initially [while still in Spain – HA]. But now that I have merited coming to Jerusalem ... I saw with my eyes that the distance between Rachel's tomb and Bethlehem is not even one *mil*. Therefore [my original] interpretation is refuted ... But [the term means] a unit of distance, as Rashi had interpreted.

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Prof. Elitzur is as uncompromising in his research as he is enthusiastic regarding his subject matter, which is holy in addition to being academically rigorous. Prof. Elitzur has given us the opportunity to upgrade our understanding of many elements in Tanakh, rabbinic teachings, and even folk traditions. This volume enlightens our learning, and will foster a more profound love of the Land of Israel through intimate knowledge of the settings for the eternal prophetic narratives in Tanakh.

Rabbi Hayyim Angel
Bible Faculty, Yeshiva University
National Scholar, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals



Preface

This book is the English version of my Hebrew *Makom baParasha*, published in 2014. The credit for this book belongs first and foremost to Yedidya Tanami, editor in chief of the Reshet Moreshet radio station of the Israel Broadcasting Authority. He had invited me to host a weekly program, bearing the same name, which aired every Friday afternoon before Shabbat. In these broadcasts, usually no more than ten minutes long, I presented a short summary of a topic that held professional interest but was also accessible to the layperson. I tried to avoid the most well-worn topics, preferring to focus on the unusual and unfamiliar. This gave me the opportunity to present my own and others' original ideas on biblical geography without the burdensome requirements of academic writing – which compel one to spend months reviewing the body of existing research before writing a single original sentence, and sink every fresh idea into a quagmire of citations and analysis of dissenting or similar opinions. The limited time frame of the radio program forced me to focus and present the main idea clearly and concisely.

When I collected the recordings of most of these segments, I realized that I was in possession of a treasure that would be a shame to lose. I decided to publish them in written form, along with some additional material. As someone who has been immersed in the fields of Hebrew

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language, biblical and historical realia, and geography, I had here been given an opportunity to present numerous subjects that I had heard and read about, and ideas that I had developed, in brief and plain language. The structure of this book – the cycle of the year and the weekly *parasha* – allowed and indeed obligated me to weave in some reflections on conceptual aspects of the Torah and Jewish thought, which lead from time to time to a style reminiscent of traditional homiletics as well as to discussion of current events.

In writing this book, my guiding light was the fascinating work *Words and Their History* (Heb.), written by the greatest of the previous generation's scholars of the Hebrew language, Prof. Yechezkel Kutscher, *z"l*. This short book was described by its author as "a book for reading, not for study," in which he presented, charmingly and without the weightiness of academic writing, a variety of topics at the intersections of language, history, and realia that were uniformly fascinating to read. Thanks to the professionalism and broad range of knowledge reflected in the book – and contrary to the author's assertions – the book is considered a legitimate source for academic citation, which goes to show that thoughtful professionalism and lighthearted brevity are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Thank God, I have realized that my attempt to emulate his style turned out to be successful and found an audience beyond the "weekly *parasha* sheets."

My greatest and most esteemed teacher was my father, Prof. Yehuda Elitzur, *z"l*. My late father truly united faith and science and was an extraordinary source of original ideas and interpretation. However, much of his work remains unpublished, passed down in manuscripts or as an oral inheritance. In this book, as in much of my other writing, I frequently cite his work and ideas, both published and unpublished; sometimes his influence is evident even when I do not mention him by name.

I have also quoted in a number of places my other teachers and friends with whom I clarified certain issues through methodical study, tours of the relevant area, or casual conversation. I spent formative years working in the Ofra Field School in the 1970s and '80s. Israel was generally a quiet place back then, and the staff of the field school – young, talented, hungry for knowledge – wandered the land freely and guided tours through the cities of our Patriarchs and in villages in the Benjamin

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region and Samaria, talking with Arabs and Samaritans, making discoveries, and creating a fertile ground for the study of concrete findings from the field through the lens of the Bible and other Jewish sources. Prominent people from this group include Hanan Eshel z"l, Amos Frumkin, Ze'ev Erlich, and especially Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun – a man from whom I have learned a great deal about understanding the Bible, even if I do not always agree with his understanding of the present.

My son-in-law, Shlomi Samet, was the one who encouraged me to work quickly and publish a book that is aesthetically pleasing and includes maps and pictures that elucidate the content. In the current volume, I attempt to continue in the same line. My daughter Rivka helped me prepare some of the sketches. The maps were created with the utmost professionalism by Studio Waldman in Ofra. More than one hundred images are included in this book. I would like to thank all of the people who helped me collect them, some of whom did so with no expectation of reward. Their names appear in the captions alongside the pictures.

The English version of this book started out in the form of chapters that were serialized on the Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash website of Yeshivat Har Etzion in Alon Shevut, Israel, expertly translated by Daniel Landman, under the supervision of Rabbi Reuven Ziegler, who kindly recommended the next stage of publishing it at Maggid Books. I extend my heartfelt thanks first and foremost to the editorial director of Maggid Books, Rabbi Ziegler, without whom this English publication would neither have commenced nor been completed, and to Mr. Matthew Miller, publisher of Koren. It was a pleasure to work day-to-day with Shira Finson, Ita Olesker, and Caryn Meltz, who managed the editing of the book. I would also like to express my thanks to the wonderful editing team of Avigayil Steiglitz and Sorelle Spitzer, for their careful review and contributions, and to Kuti Teper and Shlomit Partok for their help in compiling the indexes.

Yoel Elitzur

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Genesis



Parashat Bereshit

The Garden and the Euphrates River

Where Is the Garden of Eden?

As we begin the yearlong cycle of Torah reading with *Parashat Bereshit*, we find ourselves in the midst of a narrative that centers around a unique setting: the Garden of Eden. Where is this mysterious place? Is it some supernatural realm that does not truly exist in the world as we know it, or can we actually pinpoint its location on a map?

The Torah describes the Garden of Eden using concrete geographical terminology:

A river issues from Eden to water the garden, and it then divides and becomes four branches. The name of the first is the Pishon, the one that winds through the whole land of Havilah, where the gold is... bdellium is there, and lapis lazuli. The name of the second river is the Gihon, the one that winds through the whole land of Cush. The name of the third river is Tigris, the one that flows east of Asshur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates. (Gen 2:10–14)

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Two of these four rivers are well known to us: the Tigris and the Euphrates. In contrast, we are unfamiliar with the identities of the first two rivers listed here, and, what is more, they are not mentioned thereafter in all of Tanakh. The verses provide us with hints as to their locations, but these serve only to confuse us further: the Pishon surrounds the land of Havilah, while the Gihon surrounds the land of Cush. Cush can ostensibly be found somewhere in Africa. The land of Havilah, “where the gold is,” is most likely connected to the “Havilah” listed as one of the sons of Yoktan (a descendant of Shem, son of Noah). Yoktan’s sons and their descendants were tribal people who settled in the southern end of the Arabian Peninsula.¹ The problem is that there are no significant rivers in South Arabia, and all attempts to link the Pishon to one of the torrents of that region have been unconvincing. In light of this difficulty, perhaps we must conclude that the information presented to us in these verses does not actually reflect real-world geography. Yet the Tigris and the Euphrates are quite real, and furthermore, the descriptions of the Pishon and the Gihon are written in a realistic, geographic style, not in the abstract terminology that characterizes descriptions of otherworldly locations and entities.

What are the major rivers of the Eastern Mediterranean, the home of our forefathers? Undoubtedly these are the Tigris and the Euphrates in the north and the Nile in the southwest. Since the tributaries of the Nile originate in “the land of Cush,” which is in central Africa, there may actually be some justification in identifying them as the Pishon and the Gihon, and their meandering course may fit the phrase, “the one that winds through.” Indeed, following the lead of William F. Albright, many believe that the Pishon and the Gihon are what we refer to today as the Blue Nile and the White Nile, the two major tributaries of the Nile River.

But this theory creates a new, fundamental problem: the Blue Nile and the White Nile are located far to the south of the so-called Fertile Crescent, while the sources of the Tigris and the Euphrates are located far to the north. Because of this difficulty, there is a wide range of other

1. Genesis 10:26–30. Arabs trace the lineage of these southern tribes to an ancient forefather named Qaḥṭān, apparently equivalent to the biblical Yoktan.

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opinions about the identity of the Pishon and the Gihon. According to an ancient Jewish interpretation,² the Pishon is the Ganges and the land of Havilah is India. Still others maintain that the Pishon and the Gihon are located in Asia Minor, and other opinions abound. In order to square these interpretations with the biblical text, some invoke a possible alternative location for the land of Cush: what we know today as the mountainous Hindu Kush region in Afghanistan and northern Pakistan. This discrepancy is reflected in the Talmud (Megilla 11a): “One said that Hoddu [India] is at one end of the world and Cush is at the other, and the other said that Hoddu and Cush adjoin one another.”

Dov Ashbel placed the Garden of Eden in the vicinity of Mount Ararat in Eastern Anatolia, the region in which both the Tigris and the Euphrates originate. Ashbel maintained that the Pishon and the Gihon are additional rivers local to that region that drain into the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea, forcing him into some creative interpretations of “the land of Havilah” and “the land of Cush.”

German scholar Friedrich Delitzsch, who dedicated an entire book to the question of the Garden of Eden’s location, maintained that the Garden of Eden was in Babylonia, specifically its fertile southern region adjacent to the Persian coast. Delitzsch identified the Pishon and the Gihon as canals running from the Euphrates (which may originally have been natural streams) and Cush as the land known as kašši, or northern Babylonia. Others placed the Garden of Eden in modern-day southern Iraq and identified the Pishon and the Gihon as the Karun and Karkheh Rivers, which originate in the mountains of Iran (the Karkheh flows through the ruins of Susa, ancient Shushan).

Hermann Gunkel took his analysis of this question to an entirely different dimension – quite literally to outer space. The river that “issues from Eden,” according to Gunkel, refers to the Milky Way and its four spiral “arms” visible to the naked eye. The names the Torah gives these arms are borrowed from the names of four famous rivers throughout the world.

2. See Josephus, *Antiquities* 1:38, *Targum Neofiti*, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, and even Jerome, the Church Father, apparently following his Jewish teachers, in his book *Hebraicae Quaestiones in Libro Geneseos*.

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Ultimately, it seems unlikely that we will be able to pinpoint the precise location of the Garden of Eden. All we know is where we are today – exiled from its borders, with the “fiery, ever-turning sword” barring us from entering again.

The Euphrates River

The Euphrates is the fourth river listed in the geographical description of the Garden of Eden, and we would be remiss if we did not discuss its great importance in the region. The Torah often refers to the Euphrates as “the Great River.” It is longer than the Tigris, and unlike the Tigris, all of its water originates in the northern mountains and no tributaries augment its flow in its course through Iraq, the more significant section of its overall course. As a result, the flow of the Euphrates in its southern part is generally serene, and the water level decreases gradually.³ The area of the Tigris-Euphrates river system is known as Mesopotamia, Greek for “between the rivers,” and is often termed “the cradle of civilization.”⁴ The land between the Euphrates and the Tigris was home to Assyria in the northeast, Mari and Aram in the northwest, and Sumer, Babylonia, and Akkadia in the south.

Hazal interpreted “the Great River” as a reference to its role as the border of the Land of Israel. However, it is worth noting that throughout Tanakh, the term “the River” is a reference to the Euphrates as well. In his farewell speech to the nation, Joshua reminds the people of Israel of their roots: “In olden times, your forefathers lived beyond the River” (Josh. 24:2). Ahiya the Shilonite later warns the people of the exile that will drive the nation back to that region: “And [He] will scatter them beyond the River” (I Kings 14:15). In addition to the mention of the Euphrates’s role as a border in God’s promise to Abraham – “from the river of Egypt to the Great River, the Euphrates River” (Gen. 15:18) – we find another mention in God’s promise to Abraham’s descendants

3. See *Sifrei Deuteronomy* 7 and Genesis Rabba 16:3, Ed. Theodor-Albeck.

4. There is some debate over whether this was the meaning of “Mesopotamia” in the original Greek. Jacob J. Finkelstein argued that the word, along with the Hebrew name “Aram Naharayim” that preceded the Greek, actually referred solely to the Euphrates.

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at Sinai: “I will set your borders from the Sea of Reeds to the Sea of Philistia, and from the wilderness to the River” (Ex. 23:31).

A well-known characteristic of biblical poetry is the lack of the definite article. Because of this, in the poetic portions of Tanakh, the Euphrates is often referred to simply as “River,” and not “the River.” For example, Jeremiah rebukes, “What, then, is the good of your going to Egypt to drink the waters of the Nile? And what is the good of your going to Assyria to drink the waters of River?” (Jer. 2:18). Similarly, we find in Psalms: “Let him (King Solomon) rule from sea to sea, and from River to the ends of the earth” (Ps. 72:8), an abbreviated version of the promised borders we read of in Exodus 23.⁵

Ever Ha-nahar – Beyond the Euphrates

At a certain point during the biblical period, the meaning of the expression “beyond the River (Euphrates)” seems to have changed. We have already noted the usage of the phrase in both Joshua’s farewell address and in Ahiya’s ominous prophecy, where they mean “beyond” quite literally: Joshua is speaking about our forefathers who lived on the “other side” of the Euphrates, with respect to the Land of Israel – meaning beyond its eastern banks – and Ahiya is threatening that the people of Israel would later be exiled to that same far-flung region. The same usage can be found in the description of David’s wars: “Hadadezer sent for and brought out the Arameans from across the River (Euphrates)” (II Sam. 10:16).

However, in the beginning of I Kings we read that Solomon “controlled the whole region beyond the River – all the kings beyond the River, from Tiphseh to Gaza” (5:4). In this verse, it seems clear that “beyond the River” refers not to the eastern side of the river, but to its western side, where the people of Israel actually lived. If so, why is this region called “beyond the River”?

The answer to this question can be found by examining the Book of Ezra-Nehemiah. The expression “*ever ha-nahar*” (or *avar nahara* in the Aramaic part of Ezra) appears thirteen times throughout the book, each time referring to the area within the boundaries of the greater Land

5. In Zech. 9:10 the same phrase is used concerning the prospective king.

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of Israel – from the Euphrates to the Egyptian border. This usage can be traced back to the time of Sargon II, king of the Assyrian Empire, when it was written in Assyrian texts as *eber nāri*. In a royal inscription of Esarhaddon (680-669 BCE), the kings of Tyre, Judah, Edom, Moab, Gaza, Ashkelon, Ekron, Byblos, Arwad, Shamshiruna (?), Ammon, and Ashdod are listed as the kings of *ḥatti and eber nāri*, the former being the Akkadian name for Syria. From here the usage passed to the Babylonians and the Persians, who minted coins bearing the Aramaic version of the name: *avar nahara*. The same phrase was also found in a Greek inscription, written as *peran Euphratou*, literally “beyond the Euphrates.”

The fundamental question here is where the true geographical center of gravity lies. The earlier occurrences of the expression “beyond the River” were based naturally on the perspective of the Land of Israel: We are “here” and they – Assyria, Babylonia, and Haran – are “beyond the Euphrates.” Only much later do we find sources that unintentionally take the opposite approach, identifying ourselves as the “other”: Assyria, Babylonia, and Susa represent the epicenter of the world, while we in the Land of Israel are resigned to the region “beyond the Euphrates.”

We can draw an analogy here to the modern usage of the expression “Middle East” (synonymous with “Near East”), a term used even by those who live in the region, despite its Eurocentric implications. From the perspective of the Europeans who coined the phrase, Israel and its neighbors lie, literally, to the near east, while China and Japan comprise the Far East based on similar logic.

The watershed moment at which “beyond the Euphrates” reversed its meaning was, in all likelihood, the rise of the Assyrian Empire. The only difficulty with this explanation is the verse in I Kings describing Solomon, who predated the rise of the Assyrians by many years. The answer, quite simply, is that the verse “For he controlled the whole region beyond the Euphrates – all the kings beyond the Euphrates” reflects the mindset of the author of the Book of Kings and not that of Solomon or the people of his time.

Appearances in the Targumim

It is worth noting that Onkelos and Jonathan, in their respective Aramaic translations of the Torah and the Prophets, render the Hebrew word *nahar*

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as *perat* (Euphrates) even when the term is plainly used in the general sense. Balaam's laudatory description of the people of Israel upon seeing their encampment – "like gardens beside a river" (Num. 24:6) – was translated by Onkelos as: "like watered gardens by the Euphrates." The same phenomenon can be seen in the final chapter of Isaiah: "I will extend to her prosperity like a river" (66:12), translated by Jonathan as: "I will bring to her prosperity like the floods of the Euphrates River." The first example may, to some extent, reflect the speaker's background. After all, Balaam lived in the vicinity of the Euphrates,⁶ and it stands to reason that river imagery, whether consciously or subconsciously, would enter into his poetic lexicon.

Kerei and Ketiv

One notable example of the interplay between "the River" and "the Euphrates River" in Tanakh can be found in the description of David's battle with Hadadezer: "David defeated Hadadezer son of Rehob, king of Zobah, who was then on his way to recover his border at the Euphrates River" (II Sam. 8:3).⁷ The commentators dispute exactly what series of events led to David's victory: Did David ambush Hadadezer while the king of Zobah was en route to the Euphrates? Or was it David himself who was traveling to the river to restore his own monument, stopping along the way to defeat Hadadezer? The answer to this question does not interest us here; instead we will focus on a quirk in the wording of the verse. According to Masoretic tradition, the word "Euphrates" is an example of *kerei velo ketiv*, a word that is read along with the rest of the verse but not actually written in the traditional text. Thus, the *ketiv* of the verse reads simply: "to restore his monument at the River." Which version we accept – the *ketiv* or the *kerei* – is irrelevant; the two traditions are equivalent in meaning. Whether we read "the River" or "the Euphrates River," the identity of the river here is never in question.

The Euphrates as a Border of the Land of Israel

Before we conclude, we must emphasize the most important function of the Euphrates River as its role as one of the borders of the greater Land of Israel. The Euphrates plays a part in each of the Torah's repetitions of

6. See Num. 22:5, 23:7, and Deut. 23:5.

7. See the parallel verse in I Chronicles 18:3, where the verse reads, "to set up his monument."

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the borders of the Land of Israel in its broad, promised form. The river is mentioned as a border in God's original promise to Abraham at the Covenant of the Pieces: "To your offspring I assign this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates" (Gen. 15:18). This pledge is repeated at the covenant at Sinai (Ex. 23:31) and three times in the plains of Moab (Deut. 1:7; 11:24; Josh. 1:4).

We will close with a remarkable commentary from an unlikely source. In several interviews, Yasser Arafat made a startling claim regarding the modern Israeli flag: The two broad blue stripes represent the Nile and the Euphrates Rivers, and the Star of David between the stripes represents the Jewish people. Thus, argued Arafat, the flag symbolizes Israel's intent to expand its territory to the entire area between the two major rivers. Arafat's theory angered many Israelis at the time, but the truth is that his take on the flag was merely a visual representation of what can be found explicitly in the words of the Torah. Instead of reacting to Arafat's commentary as if it were a kind of blood libel, we should instead see it as a message of well-wishing for the realization of our national destiny.

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