

Denis Baly

## The Pitfalls of Biblical Geography in Relation to Jordan

My thesis is that the biblical writers, with one exception, had little or no personal knowledge of the country east of the Jordan, that their views of it were often prejudiced, and that this has not been understood by modern scholars. The biblical evidence involves historical traditions and records, prophetic teaching, a certain amount of what are called the Writings, and the four Gospels.

All the earliest material is characterised by a strong sense of inter-tribal relationship, with Jacob and Esau, i.e. Edom, being accounted brothers (Gen. 25: 19–34) and sons of Abraham, and the Moabites and Ammonites sons of Lot, Abraham's nephew. The fighting of this early period seems to have been little more than inter-tribal skirmishing, but what is striking is the sharp distinction between the nature of the tribal boundaries west of the Jordan, as they are recorded in the Book of Joshua, and those to the east. West they are all cultural, adhering closely to the lines dividing different soil types, and therefore different patterns of agriculture. East of the Jordan, however, the boundaries as described in the Bible are strategic, notably the Arnon (Mojjib), held to be the northern limit of Moab territory (Deut. 3: 12, 16), and the Jabbok (Zerqa) to be the boundary of the Ammonites. These frontiers are asserted again in Joshua 12: 1–6 and 13: 15–32, which have the most exaggerated concept of the extent of Israelite territory. But in fact rivers, although attractive to the political and military mind, are almost never natural limits since the cultural patterns on both sides are usually the same. The normal tendency is for a people to expand as far as the natural limit of its own particular way of life, as may be seen, for instance, in the expansion of German-speaking people south of the summit of the Alps. So also east of the Jordan. Moab did expand northward across the Arnon, and the Ammonites did not remain confined to the eastern side of the Jabbok. It was their expansion west of the Jabbok that caused Jephthah to repulse them (Judges 10: 6–11: 33), but the biblical account contains a notorious confusion between Ammon and Moab.

During the monarchy the ebb and flow of tribal conflicts gave place to deliberate political expansionism, and the tribes of Reuben and Gad essentially disappear from history as territorial concepts. In the days of the Babylonian exile the prophet

Ezekiel envisaged that after the return they would be settled west of the Jordan, which would become the eastern boundary of Israel. Throughout the monarchy the attitude of both Israel and Judah towards the people on the eastern plateau seems to have been one of almost unremitting enmity, coupled with attempts, always temporary, to bring it under Palestinian control. Only the Ajlun district remained firmly Israelite until the northern kingdom was overwhelmed by the Assyrians in 722 BC.

This enmity is apparent also in the prophetic books, reaching its climax in the savage denunciation of Edom by the prophet Ezekiel, outraged by the Edomite expansion into Judah when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587. But the condemnation of Ammon, Edom and Moab is not much less severe in Isaiah (15: 1–16.4; 34: 1–17) and in Jeremiah (25: 15–38).

Enmity was certainly not the only attitude of the people west of the Jordan towards the territory they could see to the east of them. Quite obviously they thought of it also as a possible region of refuge. David took his father and mother to Moab so that they might be safe from Saul (1 Sam. 22: 3–4) and he himself fled eastward across the Jordan at the time of Absalom's revolt. Others who sought sanctuary east of the Jordan included the family of Saul after his death in the tragic battle against the Philistines (1 Sam. 31; 11 Sam. 2: 8–10), Elimelech, the father-in-law of Ruth (Ruth 1: 1), and the Christians who fled to Pella and probably other places after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. This eastward movement in time of trouble in Palestine has, of course, been repeated again and again in history right down to our own day, and although occasionally a family, or some members of a family, have gone in the hopes of acquiring land, the normal pattern has been for refugees from the west to trek eastwards with every hope and expectation of returning to their villages and farms when the bitterness of death had passed.

The point I am making here is that the biblical writers, and also the people whom from time to time they quote, viewed the territory east of the Jordan from outside. They could see much of it quite clearly from a distance, but it was always from a distance, and what they saw was but the western edge

of the fascinating territory we now know as 'Jordan'.

The manner in which they speak about it indicates second-hand knowledge. The strange mention of the 'Forest of Ephraim' somewhere in the highlands of Gilead, where David's army defeated that of Absalom (II Sam. 18: 6–8), can to my mind be explained only by the probability that it was perceived to be similar to that on the heights of Ephraim, of which, of course, Gilead is the geological extension. *Har*, or *harei*, *ha-abarim* (the heights beyond, or distant heights), from which Moses viewed the promised land, and where he died and was buried (Num. 27: 12; 33: 45–48; Deut. 32: 49), is in all the English versions known to me translated as the 'mountains of Abarim', and the Jerusalem Bible goes so far as to speak of 'the mountains of the Abarim range', which is nonsense if one is standing on the plateau, and makes sense only if one is viewing these hills from somewhere like the Mount of Olives or Bethlehem. *Abarim*, in fact, seems to have been a very vague and general term for 'the land over there', and could be used also for the rift valley, as in Ezek. 39: 11.

The Jebel Druze, the biblical 'Mountain of Bashan', is also spoken of only in general terms. It was certainly visible from Gilead, especially when snow-covered throughout the winter, and was evidently famous for its forests (e.g. Isaiah 2: 12–13; 33: 9), but nowhere is there any indication that Isaiah or anyone else was aware of the striking difference between these rough black basalt mountains and those regions more familiar to them.

In the New Testament the land beyond Jordan is mentioned only in the Gospels. The writers display no evidence that they were acquainted with the region although the Synoptic gospels record that Jesus went there more than once. John mentions only three very brief visits (John 3: 25; 6: 1; 10: 40). All four evangelists seem to have envisaged 'the other side of the Jordan' as foreign, pagan country, altogether 'beyond the pale'. There were Jewish people living in some areas east of the Jordan, but they were a minority. Josephus frequently speaks of the territory east of the Jordan ruled by Herod Antipas as Perea, the land beyond.

The only biblical writer who displays quite evident knowledge of life on the Jordanian plateau, and perhaps especially of Edom, is the author of the Book of Job. His vivid metaphors and similes reflect a life where caravans from Arabia are common (e.g. 6: 19), where sheep herding and dwelling in tents is not only taken for granted, but is highly esteemed (5: 23–24; 21: 10–11; 28–29; 30: 1). But it is also a life in which vines and olives are cultivated (15: 33–34) and where judges sit at the gate of the town (29: 27). In other words it describes a very diverse economy, unlike the situation west of the Jordan, where agriculture played a far more important part than the herding of sheep and goats. The climate also is more Jordanian than Palestinian. Snow is mentioned more often in Job than in any other book in the Bible (6: 16; 9: 30; 24: 19; 37: 6; 38: 22) and destructive flash floods are known (12: 15). Desert and semi-desert animals are familiar, lions, wild asses, mountain goats, wild oxen, ostriches, hawks and eagles, but

immediately we come to the speeches of Elihu (ch. 32–37) this disappears almost entirely. Whoever wrote this addition to the book clearly did not share the author's background.

All this does not seem to have been recognized and understood by biblical scholars. To the best of my knowledge, and here I am confining myself to books and articles written in English, there seems to be no recognition that the biblical view of the Transjordanian plateau must of necessity be a foreign one. Even so great a scholar as George Adam Smith, who certainly knew the country, perceived it in biblical terms and not in terms of itself. Admittedly, the major ancient literature, i.e. the Bible and Josephus, is of necessity Palestinian, and inevitably this has affected the thinking of scholars, but it should not have prevented them from recognizing the foreignness and therefore the possibility of prejudice.

During the last year or so I have been much involved with biblical dictionaries and encyclopedias, writing for two of them, and consulting many others, and I have been struck by how many contributors have written as if Transjordan were a kind of extension of Palestine, and that what was true of the western territory could be applied to the eastern without change. I am, of course, *not* speaking here of archaeological articles reporting the rich harvest of recent excavations, but of the more general articles, as, for instance, those concerned with weather and climate, which always deal with both Palestine and Transjordan together. Again and again the writers assume that what is true for the one must be true for the other, that the incidence of snow, the rainfall pattern, etc. are just the same, which is far from true.

It is also a lamentable fact that biblical atlases almost without exception pay inadequate attention to the great eastern plateau. Some indeed extend no further east than Amman, and almost all of them provide quite insufficient information about the territory of Edom. The many peaked Mountain of Bashan, the Jebel Druze, receives but scant attention, although it is mentioned more than once in the Old Testament, and in some atlases it is not indicated at all. Altogether neglected (except, if I may say so, by Dr Tushingham and me) is the Wadi Sirhan and the great basalt barrier which lies to the east of it. Admittedly, it is nowhere mentioned in the Bible, but it must have always been used by the camel caravans coming up from Arabia en route for Damascus, and we know this to have been true of the Nabateans in the New Testament period. The argument that eastern Syria and Jordan are at best only marginal to Biblical history is altogether misleading. The history and geography of any country cannot be properly understood in terms only of itself, as if it existed in isolation. The geography and history of the surrounding countries and their own self-understanding must be taken into account. It is to my mind tragic that we still have to remind biblical scholars of this inescapable fact, and it is also one of the great virtues of these triennial conferences that by revealing the rich heritage and the diverse environment of the Kingdom of Jordan they enable scholars to understand better, not only Jordan itself, but also the history and the geography of its neighbors.