

## Natural Conditions and Resources in East Jordan According to Biblical Literature

Literary traditions concerning the natural conditions of East Jordan in Pre-Roman times are comparatively rare. The information given by the Egyptian tales from the second millennium BC (Story of Sinuhe, The Journey of Wen-Amon), by the Egyptian historical documents and by the famous description of Lebanon and Palestine in the 'Satirical Letter' of Papyrus Anastasi I are generally limited to the West Bank, especially to the coastal region.<sup>1</sup> From the annalistic records of the Mesopotamian Kings we cannot obtain any insight into the natural conditions of East Jordan, although the countries of Ammon, Moab and Edom are often mentioned. According to the Mesopotamian sources these countries have never faced a larger Assyrian or Neobabylonian invasion. Therefore one cannot expect an intimate acquaintance with East Jordan in the royal inscriptions of Mesopotamia. The kings of Ammon, Moab and Edom paid tribute at the right time, and the tributary lists give us no more than the simple impression of their considerable prosperity and wealth in general. The gifts of tribute, enumerated in the Mesopotamian documents in question, are without significance to the economy of the region and its natural foundation. They consist of valuable materials, such as gold, silver, ivory, rare and costly kinds of timber etc, all materials which were imported or, at least, were of no specific local character.

### I

The earliest pieces of information of the natural conditions in East Jordan are preserved in the Old Testament. Before examining a few biblical remarks of special interest, chosen out of the comparatively rich material, some observations of principal signification must be taken into consideration.

1) The authors of the historical and prophetic texts in the Old Testament were no professional geographers. They never had the intention to describe the nature of East Jordan or of any other region. They were interested in religious, political

and historical matters. Therefore their view of East Jordan depends on the political structure of the region. In most cases the scattered biblical material consists of more or less occasional remarks within a religious or historical context.

We have only two relatively detailed descriptions of ancient Moab's economical situation in Isaiah 15/16, and in Jeremiah 48, which both depend in their main parts on one earlier text, the date of which is uncertain. A probable suggestion may be the beginning of the 6th century BC. Concerning ancient Ammon we find some information in Jeremiah 49, perhaps from the same period. Of later date is the very interesting description of Edom in Isaiah 34.

2) The situation is quite different in the poetical texts of the Old Testament. Here, the more or less aesthetical impressions of the landscape, of its beauty and its natural richness, used by men and praised by men, can be regarded as the centre of the texts. Besides some frequently occurring phrases of proverbial character we have one extensive and important poetical description of the landscape and the way of life in the transitional area between cultivated land and desert in the Book of Job.<sup>2</sup>

A country named Uz is mentioned in Job 1:1 as the home of the famous sufferer Job. Unfortunately, an exact identification of that country Uz has hitherto not been possible. The traditional suggestion, pointing to an area somewhere in the west of Damascus, seems not to be very sufficient. Much more probable would be a southern region of East Jordan, perhaps Edom and the adjoining areas. At any rate, the picture of Job is that of a big sheikh, an owner of numerous herds of domestic animals, cattle as well as camels, an owner of fields and pasture grounds, dwelling sometimes in houses sometimes in tents. The poetical personality of sheikh Job looks like a symbolic figure for the ultimate unity among the different ways of using the natural resources in an area like East Jordan. Agriculture, viviculture and horticulture are supplying one another. Of course, on the one hand there

<sup>1</sup> Apart from the mention of some names of conquered towns in pharaonic lists, there is only one not very significant remark on East Jordan in the 'Great Papyrus Harris' of Ramses III.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. especially Job 1:1-5; 13-19; 5:20-27; 6:15-20; 8:11-19; 14:18-19; 18:5-20; 24:2-12; 30:1-8; 37:1-13; 38:24-30; 39:1-30.

could not be—for example—any effective agriculture in this region without sheepholding, and on the other hand a profitable sheep holding depends on an effective agriculture. In this regard we have had some bitter experiences all over the world in our days: monoculture is the death of agriculture.

There is another part in the Book of Job, which concerns the natural resources especially in East Jordan. In chapter 28:1–11 the author of Job gives us one of the most ancient descriptions of mining. He does not tell us the name of the mining district in question, but everything points to the old and important copper mines in ancient Edom.

3) With regard to East Jordan all the biblical authors were outsiders, though the author of Job might have known the natural conditions of the region by personal experience. They all are looking across the natural border, formed by the deep cleft of the Jordan Valley, they are looking over there from West Jordan, sometimes friendly, sometimes hostile. This different attitude was not without influence on the view which they passed on to their readers. In particular the prophetic traditions are not free from exaggeration.

4) With special respect to the natural conditions, the spirit of exaggeration is limited by the actual knowledge of everybody. For instance, one could not highly praise the groves of date palms on the top of Mount Nebo, in spite of the common knowledge that there was not one single tree of such kind. This is an argument supporting the trustworthiness of the biblical traditions in question. Nevertheless, errors are not excluded. In Genesis 37:25, in the context of the Joseph narrative, we read about a travelling group of Ishmaelites, who were 'coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing gum, balm and myrrh, on their way to carry it to Egypt.'

Gilead is well known as the biblical name of the thickly wooded mountainous area between Ammon in the south and the region of Bashan, the region of the big townships belonging in biblical times to Aram, in the north.<sup>3</sup> It is true that the mountains of Gilead were renowned in ancient times because of their balm, extracted out of herbs and flowers taken from the forests and meadows (Jeremiah 8:22). According to Ezekiel 27:17 this balm was an article of export to the Phoenicians of Tyre—why not to the Egyptians? In fact such export going to the south is well testified by Jeremiah 46:11, but nobody would believe that gum and myrrh, both products of South Arabia, also were transported to Egypt by a caravan coming down from Gilead. On this point the author, as it seems, was confused by a particular Palestinian experience, which he thoughtlessly transferred to the Egyptian scene of his narrative. Adopting the West Jordan point of view one can understand that some Ishmaelite merchants brought their goods, including imports, from the uttermost south of the Arabian Peninsula, down from Gilead to West Jordan, choosing the route across the wilderness of Gilead and thus

avoiding the control of the Moabite and Ammonite custom authorities.

## II

In his fine and very instructive study of 'The Geography of the Bible', D. Baly has mentioned 'the pattern of the four different ways of life' in the regions 'beyond the Jordan eastward.' 'These four ways are the way of the Farmer in Bashan, the Highlander of Gilead, the Shepherd of Moab, and the Trader of Edom, and lying in the east of all of these is a fifth region, the desert, where the way of life is that of the nomad.'<sup>4</sup> The use of more or less established patterns in the Old Testament literature for characterising the natural and economical features of these countries or regions is quite obvious, and it may be of some interest to learn a little more about these patterns. We will try to do this in two cases:

### 1) Bashan

According to biblical witness this is the region on both sides of the Yarmouk River (Sheri'at el-Menadire), where archaeological researches have proved an intensive town-type culture up to the Iron I period. Corresponding with this observation, the Old Testament traditions inform us that Bashan has been a very rich area occupied by 60 fortified towns and a much greater number of towns without fortifications (Deuteronomy 3:4). The main characteristics, however, were 'the oaks of Bashan' and 'the fat cattle of Bashan'. Both phrases appear as established formulae, often mentioned in the Old Testament. Frequently the oaks of Bashan are used in the texts as a parallel to the celebrated cedars of Lebanon (Isaiah 2:13; 33:9; Jeremiah 22:20; Nahemiah 1:4; Zachariah 11:1–2). About Tyre we are told 'of oaks of Bashan they made your oars' (Ezekiel 27:6).

It is a traditional discussion, whether such extensive and important oak forests could be supposed to grow up on the thickly populated tableland of Bashan. To solve this problem one can assume that Jebel Druze was incorporated into Bashan by the biblical writers. This mountainous area, however, seems to be a little too far, and the existence of larger oak forests there in former times is uncertain. A more suitable proposal might be the northern part of Jebel Ajlun, where some smaller oak forests have survived till our time.<sup>5</sup> This proposal, however, diminishes the territory of the Gilead region seriously, but we have to take into account the occurrence of intersection. It is also possible to suppose an extension of the name Bashan (in its political significance) corresponding to the advancement of Aram in a southern direction since the 9th century BC.

The other formula, the mention of the fat cattle of Bashan, appears in some variations: 'Strong bulls of Bashan' (Psalms 22:12) and 'cows of Bashan' (Amos 4:1), the latter term

<sup>4</sup> Cf. D. Baly, *The Geography of the Bible. A Study in Historical Geography*. New York, 1957, p.219.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. G. Schumacher, *Across the Jordan*. London, 1886; *Abila, Pella and Northern Ajlun*. London, 1889.

<sup>3</sup> The name of Gilead is preserved in the names of the village Jal'ad (near Es-Salt) and of the Jebel Jal'ad.

applied by the prophet Amos to the ladies of the upper class in Samaria, but he was speaking not in his own country. Ezekiel tells comprehensively of the 'fat rams, lambs, goats, bulls, all of the fatlings of Bashan' (39:18). The insistence upon cattle and other domestic animals is somewhat surprising, because of the very well attested function of Bashan as a granary, which should be of much more importance.<sup>6</sup> But there is no contradiction: fat domestic animals are everywhere the best evidence of a rich and developed agriculture.

## 2) Moab

An often-cited short remark on the relations between king Mesha of Moab and the Israelite kings of Samaria is preserved in II Kings 3:4: 'Mesha, king of Moab, was a sheepbreeder; and he had to deliver annually to the king of Israel 100,000 lambs, and the wool of 100,000 rams . . .'. This verse is a nice example of exaggeration. Of course, the number of 100,000 lambs is not worthy of belief. Usually lambs are born in the spring. The delivering of 100,000 lambs in a short time during the early summer would have caused an economical crisis within the kingdom of Samaria, very bad for its own sheep breeders. Furthermore, the characterisation of Mesha as nothing more than a sheepbreeder includes a certain denigration, coming out of the wrath and indignation felt because of his successful struggle for freedom. Therefore it will be wise not to attribute too much authority to this short remark.

A very different view is given on the economical situation of Moab by another tradition. The introduction to the small book of Ruth reports a great famine in Palestine, therefore some of the ancestors of king David fled for refuge to Moab. The tale itself, of course, is of much later origin than these events. It was the purpose of the story to explain the appearance of a Moabite woman among the ancestry of David. However, the book of Ruth must have been written in a period during which it was quite usual to find refuge in Moab in a situation of famine. Together with the traditional notion of the fertile tablelands of Moab (in particular the region of Kerak) as important granaries, the introductory notice in the book of Ruth points to natural conditions not so different from those of Bashan.

Moreover, we have some traditions which give evidence of a flourishing vine-culture in Moab and the adjoining areas. In both traditions on Moab's economical situation mentioned above, the famous vine-culture belongs to the headlines. The text of Isaiah 16:7–12 has more details than Jeremiah 48, and is deeply impressed by the grief at a devastation of Moab expected in the near future.<sup>7</sup> According to this text the centres

of vine-culture were in the north. Heshbon, Elealeh, and especially Sibmah are mentioned by name. The grapes of Sibmah are quoted as being demanded all over the world. Its 'tendrils crossed over to the sea. I weep over you, o vine of Sibmah . . .'. The meaning of this sentence is rather uncertain. Was there some export of vine or raisins? Or is it only another case of exaggeration or hyperbole?

There are also traces of vine-culture in the southern parts of East Jordan, but the biblical testimony for it is weak. With more certainty this is testified for later times by the Greek geographer Strabo in his remarkable—in some reasons fantastic—narrative of Nabataean life: 'They have their meals in associations of thirteen persons, . . . , and the king arranges with great expenses many and lasting feasts. Nobody drinks more than eleven cups, using everytime (after one cup is emptied) another cup of gold' (XVI, 4:26).

Altogether, all this information on East Jordan gives us the impression of a widely fertile land, well watered and partly covered with green forests, mainly in the northern mountains, but in some regions of Edom too.<sup>8</sup> Green pastures occupied by numerous herds of cattle and other domestic animals are mentioned. The rich wildlife even included big mammals such as bear, wild-ox and wild-ass. Fruit- and vine-culture were widespread<sup>9</sup>, and on the tablelands agriculture flourished up to the region of the steppe in the east with additional pasture grounds during spring time.

## III

In contrast with this impression we find in the Old Testament another, different line of traditions characterising East Jordan (with the exception of the mountainous land in the north) as a desert-like steppe, open to the wanderings of nomads. That contrast is not implicitly a contradiction; it is rather a consequence of different points of view.

In general the notion of 'desert' in the Bible is subordinated to two entirely different judgments of theological origin. The one describes the desert as a region hostile to any existence of human beings, full of known and unknown dangers. According to the other one the desert is the region which in particular is close to God. Nomadic life is praised to be the ideal form of existence for the true people of God, because monotheism and nomadism belong together,<sup>10</sup> and East Jordan was considered by the biblical authors as one of the main places where God's revelation first took place, as well as at Sinai.

With regard to the presumed older tradition accepted by the author of the present text, one could propose one of the Assyrian campaigns of the last decades of the 8th century. As there is no historical or archaeological proof of any extensive and heavy devastation during the time of Assyrian and Neobabylonian supremacy (cf. above, 1st paragraph), the text might be an exaggeration of a less important incident or one of those prophecies which have not been fulfilled.

<sup>8</sup> There are noticeable remains of thicker forests consisting mainly of oak-trees (scrub) in the region between Wadi El-Mejl and the north of Petra. These forests, extremely exploited during World War I, may have been much more extensive in the distant past.

<sup>9</sup> 'Fruits' are sometimes mentioned as products of Ammon or Moab, however, without any specification (Isaiah 16:19; Jeremiah 48:32; Ezekiel 25:4).

<sup>10</sup> For details cf. K.-H. Bernhardt, *Gott und Bild*. Berlin, 1956.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. D. Baly, op. cit., p. 220.

<sup>7</sup> The cause of the foretold devastation is not clearly described in the text, but obviously the danger was expected to come from the north. The enemy vaguely pictured as 'oppressor', 'devastator' and 'treador' (16:4) is expected to seize the northern part of Moab. The towns there, from Heshbon to Jahaz (at Wadi el-Wale), have to suffer the main blow. Their inhabitants are expected to flee to the south crossing the border to Edom. If the 'enemy from the north' is a real figure we have no great choice of events, to which the text could refer as an historical background. In particular the campaigns of the Neobabylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II (605–562 BC) have to be taken into account.

Furthermore, it must be taken into consideration that the idea of desert-like conditions in East Jordan generally depends on a peculiar group of traditions referring to the situation three, four or five centuries before the biblical authors' own time. Therefore it may be a theological reconstruction; but even so, it can be a trustworthy reminiscence of the transitional period between Late Bronze and Early Iron Age, at the time when East Jordan was the scene of a stronger nomadic migration than usual.

One could also suppose that this peculiar view on the situation was influenced by experiences which have occurred during a later period, and some of the biblical sources, especially in the books of Numbers and Deuteronomy, which emphasise the desert-like character of Ammon, Moab or Edom, are of comparatively late date. They belong to the post-exilic time of the 6th and 5th century BC. In fact, there are some hints at an intensive nomadic invasion in this region during the gap between the decline of Neobabylonian supremacy and the installation of the Persian administration in Syria and Palestine after 526 BC. Such a change in the cultural situation in this period of political and administrative confusion could have been accompanied by devastation and negli-

gence with a certain ecological effect. Ezekiel 25:4–5 may refer to this situation: 'I am handing you over to the people of the east for a possession' said God to Ammon, 'and they shall set their encampments among you and make their dwellings in your midst; they shall eat your fruit, and they shall drink your milk. I will make Rabbah a pasture for camels and the cities of the Ammonites a fold for flocks.' We have learned from the results of the archaeological survey that this period of a certain increase in the nomadic elements lasted till the hellenistic period.<sup>11</sup>

The retreat or the extension of agriculture and horticulture has in many cases an effect similar to a change of climate, but there are no traces of any real noteworthy change of climate in the biblical traditions. Of course there is the well known long-lasting process of drying in East Jordan. This change, however, is man-made, and man can stop it and inaugurate a regeneration of the original natural conditions of God's creation. The first positive results of such a policy of regeneration are today visible everywhere in Jordan.

<sup>11</sup> Therefore the dating of the Book of Job is such a difficult matter. Its description of the life in Edom and the surrounding regions can only be a picture of the situation either before c. 540 BC or after the restoration in hellenistic times.