

The Geographical Context of Devarim and Its Significance

By: GEULA TWERSKY

The introductory verses of the book of *Devarim* feature an extensive list of enigmatic toponyms, which appears to aim at identifying the precise location of Moshe's final discourses. The opening verse states "These are the words that Moshe addressed to all of Israel in the Transjordan, in the wilderness, in the *Arabab, mol Suph*, between *Paran* and *Tophel*, and *Laban*, and *Hatzerot*, and *Di-zahab*."

Aside from the obvious questions that arise regarding the identification of these mysterious places, the toponyms appear to reference several, rather than a single encampment. This would seem to have the effect of obfuscating rather than clarifying the exact location of Moshe's address. Furthermore, the relevance of this ostensibly peripheral material to the content of Moshe's orations in *Devarim* appears tenuous.

Onkelos and Rashi address these issues by allegorizing the toponyms, rendering them hints to places where Israel sinned, as opposed to actual place names. This approach seeks to resolve both the problem of identification as well as relevance. Accordingly, the common theme of Israel's sinful behavior throughout their desert journey functions as a natural segue to what Rashi understood to be one of the primary themes of the book of *Devarim*: rebuke for past transgressions.¹ The figurative approach to the toponyms, however, does not satisfactorily resolve the plain sense of the text, and blatantly disregards the two prepositions of space in the verse: *mol* and *bein*.

Other commentators take the approach that our verse is describing different places where Moshe taught Torah.² This approach also falls

¹ Rashi, *Devarim* 1:1.

² Cf. Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, and Bekhor Shor, *Devarim* 1:1.

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short insofar as it neither accounts for the toponyms' lack of familiarity, nor for the sense conveyed in the verse, that these are locations in which the orations of *Devarim* will transpire, as opposed to having *already* transpired.

R. David Zvi Hoffmann observes that the first three toponyms are introduced with the letter *bet*, while the rest of the toponyms are connected by a succession of *vavs*.³ Hoffmann assumes this points to three separate encampments in which Torah was taught; “in the Transjordan,” i.e., the area of Moab, “in the wilderness in the Arabah opposite Suph,” i.e., the southern Arabah region between the Dead Sea and the Red Sea, and “between Paran and Tophel, Laban, Hazerot, and Di-zahab,” i.e., the vicinity of Kadesh Barnea. On the one hand, Hoffmann’s approach does not seem to significantly diverge from the approach that assumes each of the toponyms to refer to an individual place where Torah was taught. However, Hoffmann’s observation regarding the grammatical clustering of the final four toponyms is highly significant. Identifying the final four toponyms of verse 1 as a cluster suggests the first three toponyms in the list to form a cluster as well. Understanding the opening verse of *Devarim* to contain two toponym clusters is the first step in explicating both its meaning and its thematic relevance to the book of *Devarim*.

Devarim’s opening verse is structured according to the generalization and specification format, *klal uprat*: “These are the words that Moshe addressed to all of Israel in the Transjordan, in the wilderness, in the Arabah, *mol* Suph...” While the term “Transjordan” describes the general place of Israel’s encampment, it remains an innately ambiguous term. The ensuing toponyms, “in the Wilderness” and “in the Arabah,” continue to narrow down the location of Israel’s encampment; however, they too may reference either side of the Jordan River. The final topographic reference of the first cluster is “*mol* Suph.” Yoel Elitzur explains that in biblical Hebrew, the term *mol* is used to mean “near,” “below,” or “on the same side as.”⁴ Accordingly, we may read the fourth toponym, “*mol* Suph,” to mean “on the same side as Suph.” Assuming “Suph” refers to a place we are already familiar with, there are three possible candidates: the Red Sea, which Israel crossed at the time of the Exodus,⁵ the Red Sea south of

³ R. David Tzvi Hoffman, *Devarim* (Zvi Har-Shefer trans; Tel Aviv: Netzah, 1959), 22–23.

⁴ Yoel Elitzur, “*Mol*: Near, Below, On the Same Side As,” *Leshonenu: A Journal for the Study of the Hebrew Language and Cognate Subjects* 67.1 (2005), 7–19, (Heb.).

⁵ Ex. 13:18.

Eilat,⁶ or the Dead Sea.⁷ Rashbam explains “Suf” in our verse to reference the Dead Sea.⁸ He refers to the verse in *Shemot* in which the Dead Sea is most certainly the referent of “Yam Suf”: “And I will set your border from Yam-Suf until the Philistine Sea, and from the wilderness until the river...” (*Shemot* 23:31). Rashbam explains that this verse clearly delineates the east-west and south-north boundaries. He further notes that the Dead Sea is once again designated as Israel’s eastern border in *Devarim* 4:49, where it is called Yam Haaravah. The equation of Yam Suf with the Dead Sea explicates yet another enigmatic text, also in the opening passages of *Devarim*, which recounts Israel’s travels towards Yam Suf upon their retreat from Edom.⁹ To review, the opening verse of *Devarim* identifies the place of Israel’s encampment as the wilderness of Transjordan, in the Arabah region that is *mol* Suf, or adjacent to the Dead Sea. This description pinpoints Israel’s encampment at the northern tip of the Dead Sea, although the specific side of the Jordan being referenced is not yet clarified. We will see that it is only with the second toponym cluster that Israel’s position on the eastern bank of the Jordan River is firmly established.

The second toponym cluster, “Between Paran and Tophel, and Laban, and Hazerot, and Di-zahab” should be understood to modify the toponym Suf as opposed to the location of Moshe’s orations. In other words, rather than providing the precise coordinates of Israel’s encampment, the latter portion of verse one identifies which bank of “Suf,” or the Dead Sea, is under discussion. This leaves one to wonder why the Torah chose to include such an unusually lengthy and mysterious list of

⁶ 1 Kings 9:26.

⁷ Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Bekhor Shor identified “Suph” as “Yam Suf” of Exodus fame, while Hoffmann assumed it refers to the Red Sea south of Eilat.

⁸ It is noteworthy that oftentimes otherwise familiar biblical toponyms are found to refer to a less than obvious location. A good case in point is the *Yarden*. In Gen. 50:11, we read that Joseph and his brothers were accompanied by an official royal Egyptian entourage until the *Yarden*. It is likely, however, that *Yarden* here refers to Nahal Besor or Wadi Gaza, as opposed to the Transjordan River. This supposition is supported both by the assumed geographical route as well as by Shishak’s victory stele which lists *ywrwdn* in the vicinity of Raphiah. Cf. Aaron Demsky, “Jacob’s Funeral Cortege and the Problem of *’Eber Hayyarden*,” pp. 54-64 in Marc Zvi Brettler and Michael Fishbane eds., *Minḥab Le-Nahum: Biblical and Other Studies Presented to Nahum M. Sarna in Honour of his 70th Birthday* (London: Bloomsbury Pub., 1993), 58–59.

⁹ Deut. 1:40; 2:1.

toponyms for the presumably simple purpose of confirming Israel's easterly encampment. Furthermore, Israel's position on the eastern side of the Jordan may be easily inferred from the surrounding context. A closer look at some of the toponyms in the second cluster will lead us to a better understanding.¹⁰

Paran

Paran is mentioned in the Torah in several different contexts. It is the area in the wilderness where Israel encamped after Sinai,¹¹ and the location from which the spies were sent.¹² Alternatively, Paran is also a territory in the vicinity of Seir, or Edom, referred to in *Bereishit* as Eil Paran, or the plains of Paran.¹³

Tophel

Scholars have suggested that Tophel be identified as et-Tafileh,¹⁴ located along the Kings Highway south of Wadi al-Hasa, or Nahal Zered,¹⁵ which bordered Edom and Moab.¹⁶

Laban

Inscriptions from Rameses II featuring extensive topographical lists record a Shasu land called Laban in the vicinity of Shasu Seir (Edom) and Shasu YHWH.¹⁷ (Egyptians labeled tribes associated with the area around

¹⁰ I choose not to discuss Di-zahab here as its identity remains shrouded in mystery.

¹¹ Nu. 10:12.

¹² Nu. 13:3.

¹³ Gen. 14:6, cf. Onkelos ad loc.

¹⁴ Cf. Yohanan Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible, A Historical Geography* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1979), 203; B. Grdseloff, "Edôm, d'après les sources égyptiennes," *Revue de l'histoire juive d'Égypte* 1 (1947), 79–83.

¹⁵ Edward Robinson and Eli Smith, *Biblical Researches in Palestine and in the Adjacent Regions* 2 (London: John Murray, 1841), 555; J. M. Miller, "Moab and the Moabites," pp. 1–40 in *Studies in the Mesha Inscription and Moab* (J. Andrew Dearman, ed.; Archaeology and Biblical Studies; Atlanta: ASOR/SBL, 1989), 2; Burton MacDonald, "East of the Jordan": *Territories and Sites of the Hebrew Scriptures* (ASOR 6; Boston: ASOR, 2000), 73–74.

¹⁶ Deut. 2:13.

¹⁷ The Hieroglyph list appears in Kenneth A. Kitchen, *Rameside Inscriptions, Historical and Biographical*, II, (Oxford – Cambridge: Blackwell, 1969), p. 217. The transcriptions appear in Idem, *Rameside Inscriptions, Translated & Annotated Translations*, II (Oxford – Cambridge: Blackwell 1996), 75.

the southern and eastern parts of the Dead Sea as Shasu).¹⁸ The book of *Bamidbar* lists an encampment at Livna among Israel's wilderness itinerary, although that toponym would appear to have been located in an altogether different geographical region.¹⁹ Laban in our verse has been identified by some with Libona, south of Amman.²⁰

Ḥatzerot

While Ḥatzerot is mentioned in *Bamidbar* as one of the encampments in Israel's desert journey,²¹ toponyms stemming from the root Ḥtzr, meaning yard or homestead, are fairly common in Tanakh.²² It is noteworthy that the path bordering Edom and Moab, that is referenced with these toponyms, matches the route that Israel followed as they skirted Edom and Moab. It is within that context that several extinct tribes that once populated the general area are mentioned only a short distance away, in ch. 2. These tribes include the Eimim, Rephaim, Ḥorim, Zamzumim, and Avvim.²³ The Avvim are associated with the toponym Ḥatzerim.²⁴ The inclusion of the Avvim on the list of tribes who formerly occupied the eastern bank of the Dead Sea, suggests that they too once dwelled in the same region. Given the fact that Ḥatzerot and Ḥatzerim are essentially the same name (one ending with a male suffix and the other with a feminine suffix), it is likely that Ḥatzerot too references a location in the general area of Edom and Moab.

While the toponym list in verse 1 certainly does resonate with familiar places along Israel's desert sojourn, as pointed out by the classical commentators, the picture that emerges from this survey is that it also relates to Israel's forward advance from the vicinity of Edom toward Moabite territory. In order to appreciate the significance of this observation, we will explore the biblical theme of marching forward from Edom.

¹⁸ Donald B. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan and Israel in Ancient Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 272–273.

¹⁹ Numbers 23:20.

²⁰ Cf. Donald B. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1993), 272.

²¹ Nu. 12:16; 33:17.

²² By way of example, Ḥazor was a formidable Canaanite city-state.

²³ Deut. 2.

²⁴ Deut. 2:23.

Advancement from Edom

The Tanakh recounts the giving of the Torah at Sinai in several poetic texts. One motif common to many of these texts is God marching forth from Edom to the location of the giving of the Torah.

The Lord came from Sinai and dawned over them from Seir; He shone forth from Mount Paran. He came with myriads of holy ones from the south, from his mountain slopes. (Deut. 33: 2)

When you, Lord, went out from Seir, when you marched from the land of Edom, the earth shook, the heavens poured, the clouds poured down water. The mountains quaked before the Lord, the One of Sinai, before the Lord, the God of Israel. (Judges. 5: 4–5)

God came from Teman, the Holy One from Mount Paran. His glory covered the heavens and his praise filled the earth. (Hab. 3: 3)

The implied message is that the choice of Israel as the recipients of the Torah was not a casual or random occurrence. Rather, it was the result of a well-reasoned and deliberate selection. This understanding is the basis of the midrash which describes God as having first offered the Torah to other nations, including Edom, who rejected it.²⁵

It was noted above that the opening verses in *Devarim* are highly opaque, a quality often associated with poetic texts. By way of example, the Song of the Well also features a cryptic toponym list.

From Mattanah to Nahaliel, from Nahaliel to Bamot, and from Bamot to the valley in Moab where the top of Pisgah overlooks the wasteland. (Nu. 21: 19–20)

The enigmatic toponym list in the introductory verses of the book of *Devarim* infuses the text with a poetic texture, imbuing it with layers of subtlety. A careful reading of the text shows the opening verses of *Devarim* to share much in common with other poetic preambles to the giving of the law. Verse 2 explicitly mentions Horeb, an alternative name for Sinai, and the road that Israel followed around Mount Seir, or Edom.

It takes eleven days to go from Horeb to Kadesh Barnea by the Mount Seir road. (Deut. 1:2)

When considered together, the two opening verses of *Devarim* frame the larger context of the book of *Devarim* in its entirety, as a re-giving of

²⁵ Cf. *Sifrei* Deut. 33:2; *Rashi*, ad loc.

the law. This is clearly formulated in the words of vs. 5, *Hoil Moshe be'er et ha-Torah ha-zot*, or “Moshe began to expound this law.”²⁶

We have seen that the first five verses of *Devarim*, which serve as an introduction to the entire book, are devoted to the geographical context of the Deuteronomic re-giving of the law. The extensive topographical framework that the introduction provides for *Devarim* suggests the location of the orations of *Devarim* to be of utmost consequence. It is therefore crucial to understand the relationship between place and event. To put it simply, of what innate significance are the plains of Moab to the message of the book of *Devarim* and the re-giving of the law?

Israel's Encampment in the Plains of Moab

Israel's precise location in the Plains of Moab, as noted above, was in the Arabah region, north of the Dead Sea. To appreciate the relationship between the substance of *Devarim* and its setting, we must first clarify another seemingly unrelated issue: the location of the infamous city of Sodom.

The Location of Sodom

Sodom was part of an enclave that included five cities, or a pentapolis. The cities of the Pentapolis were Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim and Zoar.²⁷ The pentapolis was traditionally assumed by scholars to have been located in the southern Dead Sea area. This is in large part due to the misreading of the Madaba map.²⁸ The Madaba map²⁹ features a toponym in the southeastern area of the Dead Sea that has been assumed to

²⁶ See Abravanel's commentary in his introduction to *Devarim* in which he states that the book of *Devarim* in its entirety is a re-giving of the law, and *not* a rebuke for past sins. This approach differs from the view of Rashi and Nachmanides, who understood *Devarim* to contain extended orations of rebuke regarding past sins. See Rashi, Deut. 1:3, *passim*, and Nachmanides' introduction to *Devarim*. Nachmanides indeed views the majority of *Devarim* as a re-giving of the law; however, he understands its opening chapters to be words of rebuke.

²⁷ Gen. 14:8.

²⁸ Cf. W. F. Albright, “The Archaeological Results of an Expedition to Moab and the Dead Sea,” *BASOR* 14 (1924), 2–12. Albright believed that Zoar and the rest of the Cities of the Plain were buried beneath the Dead Sea.

²⁹ The Madaba map is part of a floor mosaic in the 6th cent. BCE Byzantine church of Saint George in Madaba, Jordan.

read ΖΑΡΕΔ, or Zared.³⁰ Beneath this word appears the toponym ΖΟΟΡΑ, or Zoar. The letter Ζ in the word ΖΑΡΕΔ does not actually appear in the map. It was added by scholars who assumed the letter to fill a lacuna. Yoel Elitzur, however, demonstrates that the word assumed to read ΖΑΡΕΔ, or Zared, could not possibly begin with a Ζ, as the rows of mosaic tiles that appear above the Α do not allow for the intrusion of a letter.³¹ Furthermore, Elitzur demonstrates that the final letter must be an Α, as opposed to a Δ. This is on account of a diagonal lower cross line in the final letter, contraindicating a Δ reading, as the Δ is always shaped like a triangle. Elitzur concludes that the preferred reading is ΑΡΕΑ or Area, recalling the toponym Areopolis. This city was the Greek-Roman name of Rabbat-Moab, today ar-Rabba, located on the road to the Arnon, and likely to have been the Moabite city of Ar.³²

Whereas the position of Zoar beneath the Zared River would place the Pentapolis in the southern Dead Sea basin, Zoar's position beneath Ar would place the Pentapolis in the northern Dead Sea basin. Matters are further confused by Zoar's appearance on the Madaba map at the southern tip of the Dead Sea. This would seem to place the city in the southern Dead Sea basin. Neev and Emery point out, however, that at the time when the Madaba Map was made *there was no shallow south basin*.³³ Menashe Harel adds that the peak of road-laying activity in the Dead Sea region in general, and the King's Highway in particular, was in the Roman period, and that branches of this road crossed the Lisan Peninsula and Zoar towards the Desert and Mountains of Judea.³⁴ The topographical realities of the Dead Sea region in the Roman period demonstrate that Zoar's position on the Madaba map does *not* indicate the city's position on the southern tip of the southern Dead Sea basin. Neev and Emery state:³⁵

³⁰ Cf. Herbert Donner, *The Mosaic Map of Madaba: An Introductory Guide* (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 1992), 41; David Neev, K. O. Emery, *The Destruction of Sodom, Gomorrah, and Jericho: Geological, Climatological, and Archaeological Background* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 138.

³¹ Yoel Elitzur, "'Zared' or 'Aρεα'? One Significant Detail in the Madaba Map," *Scripta Classica Israelica* 19 (2000), 155–162.

³² Nu. 21: 28.

³³ Neev and Emery, *The Destruction of Sodom*, 132.

³⁴ Menashe Harel, "Israelite and Roman Roads in the Judean Desert," *Israel Exploration Journal* 17. 1 (1967), 18–26.

³⁵ Neev and Emery, *The Destruction of Sodom*, 132–133.

As Zoar of the first century A.D. was a seaport, it had to be on the shore and must have been north of [the paved Roman road traversing the Lisan] or near the head of the Bay of Mazra'a [at the south end of the north basin]. The absence of any geographic indication for the [Lisan] peninsula's existence on the Madaba Map leads to a similar conclusion. Such an outstanding and picturesque tongue-like shore would not have been overlooked by the artist-cartographer of that map... Postures of two cargo vessels portrayed on the Madaba Map imply that the main traffic was between Zoar, port at the southeast corner of the north basin, and the north coast as close as possible to Jericho, the gate to Judea. The Bay of Mazra'a was always the main, if not the only, natural deepwater haven ... If Zoar were at Es-Safi, it never could have functioned as an efficient harbor.

The Madaba map contains additional information that may aid in locating the city of Zoar and by extension the rest of the cities of the biblical Pentapolis. The genealogy of the children of Noah in *Bereishit* describes the Canaanite settlement to have extended southwest from Zidon towards Gaza, and southeast (starting again from Zidon) towards Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboim, until Lasha.³⁶ *Talmud Yerushalmi* and *Onkelos* identify Lasha as Callirrhoe,³⁷ an area already famous in antiquity for its thermal springs.³⁸ Gesenius relates Lasha to the Arabic نشع (*Lasha*), meaning "fissure."³⁹ William Smith comments that this is "strikingly appropriate to the deep chasm of the *Zerka Main* through which the waters of Callirrhoe find an outlet to the sea."⁴⁰ The Madaba map represents Callirrhoe as an oasis along the northeastern bank of the Dead Sea, which points to the position of the Pentapolis cities even further north. The

³⁶ Gen. 10:19. Scholars misinterpreted this verse. Instead of understanding Zidon to be the starting point of *both* the southwest and southeast trajectories, thus forming a geographical triangle of settlement, they interpreted Gaza to be the starting point of the southeast trajectory, ending south of the Dead Sea. Cf. J. Penrose Harland, "Sodom and Gomorrah: The Location of the Cities of the Plain," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 5.2 (1942), 17–32, 20. This interpretation disregards Lasha's confirmed position east of the Dead Sea and south of the Pentapolis.

³⁷ *JT* (Vilna) *Megillah*, 1; *Onkelos*, Gen. 10: 19.

³⁸ Josephus, *Bellum Judaicum* 1.656–657, *Antiquitates Judaicae* 17.172–173.

³⁹ Guilelmi Gesenii, *Thesaurus Philologicus Criticus Linguae Hebraeae et Chaldaeae Veteris Testamenti*, vol. 2 (Leipzig, 1840), 764.

⁴⁰ William Smith, *Dr. William Smith's Dictionary of the Bible: Comprising Its Antiquities, Biography, Geography, and Natural History*, vol. 2 (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1873), 1598.

northern location of the Pentapolis, relative to the Dead Sea, matches the description of *Devarim* that places Zoar, the southernmost Pentapolis city, in the southern border of the tribal allotment of Reuben/Gad,⁴¹ and the verses in both *Yirmiyahu* and *Yishayahu* that place Zoar in the *middle* of a north to south scan of Moabite territories.⁴² This geographic understanding is further supported by the midrash which is cited by Rashi in his commentary; that Lot was instructed by the angels to flee to the Hebron mountain range and take refuge with Avraham. Such an escape route could only have been feasible if Sodom was located near the foothills of the Hebron mountain range.⁴³

The Cities of the *Kikkar*

Further support for the northern location of Sodom stems from the use of the word “*kikkar*” in the topographical description of the environs of the Pentapolis.

Lot looked around and saw that the whole plain [*kikkar*] of the Jordan toward Zoar was well watered, like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt. This was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. (Gen. 13:10)

The destroyed cities are repeatedly referred to as the land of the *kikkar*.⁴⁴ The northern location of the *kikkar* is consistently supported by the biblical evidence. In *Devarim*, Moshe looks out upon the land and sees the *kikkar* in the valley of Jericho.⁴⁵ In the book of Shmuel, the *kikkar* is depicted within running distance of Jerusalem.⁴⁶ King Shlomo is reported to have cast the bronze vessels for the Temple “in the plain of the Jordan Kikkar between Succot and Zerethan.”⁴⁷ Later, in Nehemiah’s time, the term *kikkar* once again describes an area in the environs of Jerusalem.⁴⁸ Lot is said to have been able to view the entire *kikkar* from a location between Bethel and Ai, which would favor a north of the Dead Sea location for the cities.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the very terms *kikkar ha-Yarden*, *kikkar*

⁴¹ Deut. 34: 3.

⁴² Cf. Jer 48:34; Isa. 15:1–5.

⁴³ Cf. *Midrash Aggadab* (Buber), *Bereishit* 19:17; *Rashi*, ad loc.

⁴⁴ Gen. 19:28.

⁴⁵ Deut. 34:3.

⁴⁶ 2 Sam. 18: 21–24.

⁴⁷ 2 Chron. 4:17.

⁴⁸ Neh. 3:22; 12:28.

⁴⁹ Gen. 13:3, 10.

of the Jordan River,⁵⁰ and *kikkar* Jericho,⁵¹ point to the northern location of the plain.

The Archaeological Evidence

Steven Collins has been excavating Tall El-Hammam, Jordan, located in the eastern part of the lower Jordan Valley close to the mouth of the Jordan River, since 2005. It is widely accepted that Tall el-Hammam is the location of *Abel Hashittim*,⁵² the place of Israel's final encampment prior to the crossing of the Jordan River.⁵³ Collins has further determined Tall al-Hammam to have been the political and cultural epicenter of a significant Bronze Age city-state. Tall El-Hammam was "one of the largest city-states in the S Levant through the EBA, IBA, and MBA... at least for the S Levant, there was no greater continuous center of civilization from the Chalcolithic Period through the Middle Bronze Age than the 300 square kilometers for which Tall al-Hammam functioned as the epicenter for two-and-a-half millennia."⁵⁴ The Tall el-Hammam destruction is dated toward the end of the Middle Bronze 2 period, between 1750 and 1650 BCE.⁵⁵ Collins states the case for Tall el-Hammam as biblical Sodom. "Its Middle Bronze Age (MBA) fortifications and gateway complex (Gen. 19:1) are enormous, even spectacular. Its sprawling size places it among the 'uppermost tier' cities of the southern Levant—along with Hazor,

⁵⁰ Gen. 13:10.

⁵¹ Deut. 34:3.

⁵² Nu. 33:49.

⁵³ Cf. R. K. Harrison, "Shittim," in *The New International Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology* (Edward M. Blaiklock, ed., NIDBA; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1983), 413; Rami G. Khouri, *Antiquities of the Jordan Rift Valley* (Manchester, MI: Solipsist, 1988), 76; Burton MacDonald, *East of the Jordan: Territories and Sites of the Hebrew Scriptures* (Victor H. Matthews, ed., ASOR Books 6; Boston, Mass.: American Schools of Oriental Research, 2000), 90; Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. and Duane Garrett, eds., *NIV Archaeological Study Bible: An Illustrated Walk Through Biblical History and Culture* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2006), 233. Anson F. Rainey and R. Steven Notley, *The Sacred Bridge: Carta's Atlas of the Biblical World*, (San Francisco: Carta, 2006), 124.

⁵⁴ Steven Collins, et al., *The Tall Al-Hammam Excavations* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2015), xxxvii.

⁵⁵ Steven Collins, "Tall el-Hammam Is Still Sodom: Critical Data-Sets Cast Serious Doubt on E.H. Merrill's Chronological Analysis," *Biblical Research Bulletin* 13.1 (2013), 1–28, 8; idem, "Where Is Sodom? The Case for Tall El-Hammam," *BAR* 31.2 (2013), 32–41, 70–71.

Ashkelon, and Kabri. The violence and intense heat of its terminal conflagration is ‘otherworldly’ to say the least. The size and number of its satellite cities and towns bespeaks the Genesis cities of the *kikkar*.”⁵⁶

A multidisciplinary team of scientists has recently determined that a low-altitude meteor explosion and cosmic airburst at Tall El-Hammam, significantly larger than the 1908 explosion over Tunguska, Russia, left behind a 1.5-meter-thick carbon and ash destruction layer.⁵⁷ The cosmic airburst, about a thousand times more powerful than the nuclear bomb dropped on Hiroshima, caused air temperatures to rise above 2200 degrees Celsius, far exceeding temperatures of any terrestrial phenomena such as a volcanic eruption. Mudbrick walls and fortifications instantly disappeared, leaving behind only scorched foundations. Mudbrick, plaster, and pottery shard remnants were found to have bubbled and melted into glass. The destruction layer has been found to be rich in minute diamondoids, formed by wood and plants that were instantly transformed by the intense heat and pressure of the event. High levels of salt were deposited during the impact, rendering the once fertile land utterly desolate. The city and its environs were abandoned for approximately 700 years following these events. The authors conclude that “Regarding this proposed airburst, an eyewitness description of this 3600-year-old catastrophic event may have been passed down as an oral tradition that eventually became the written biblical account about the destruction of Sodom.”⁵⁸

The Middle Bronze Age dating of the destruction of Sodom is corroborated by the biblical chronology.⁵⁹ Whereas current trends in scholarship supporting the historicity of the biblical account, date the Exodus

⁵⁶ Collins, “Tall el-Hammam Is Still Sodom,” 1.

⁵⁷ Ted E. Bunch et al., “A Tunguska sized airburst destroyed Tall el-Hammam a Middle Bronze Age city in the Jordan Valley near the Dead Sea,” *Scientific Reports* 11 (2021), 1–64.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 57.

⁵⁹ Steven Collins adds that “The fact that the lives of Abr(ah)am, Isaac, and Jacob were all affected by famine in Canaan is significant. Climatologically, the first half of the Middle Bronze Age (MB1, ca. 2000/1950–1800 BCE) was a wet phase in which the sedentary population of the S Levant rose dramatically—remember, it had collapsed at the end of EB3 (ca. 2350 BCE) with the onset of a severe dry-cycle—leading to the height of Canaanite urban civilization, ca. 1800. During MB1, driven by a strong agricultural engine, the Levant burgeoned with cities, towns and villages, launching what is known to archaeologists as the ‘golden age’ of Canaanite culture. The MB1 population of Canaan rose dangerously, stressing the limits of the land to supply adequate foodstuffs and fresh water. Although the wet-cycle continued through MB2, beginning around 1800

to the 13th cent. BCE,⁶⁰ the biblical chronology places the Exodus from Egypt approximately 150 years earlier, in the mid-15th cent. BCE.⁶¹ The Torah's report of a 430-year sojourn period in Egypt⁶² seems to contradict the Torah's reckoning of the genealogy of Levy.⁶³ Jewish tradition, however, has consistently interpreted the 430-year period to have begun already in the days of Avraham.⁶⁴ Benno Jacob sums up the discussion:⁶⁵ "The traditional Jewish assertion, which has been consistently defended, has a better basis, for it asserts that the period of the patriarchs was included in the 430 years. The Septuagint and the Samaritan texts have therefore added a phrase. The Septuagint stated: "which they spent in the Land of Egypt and in the Land of Canaan." The Samaritan text reads: "And the sojourn of the b'nei Yisrael and their fathers in the Land of

BCE sporadic fluctuations in the Levantine climate—exacerbated by severe deforestation and heavy population density—created a situation that drove vast numbers of Canaanites and other Semitic Asiatics into the Delta region of Egypt. By ca. 1700 these Asiatics wrested control of the Nile Delta to become the Hyksos rulers of Egypt's Second Intermediate Period. While the principal city-states of the southern Levant remained viable during MB2, famine was an intermittent-if-not-chronic problem—as attested in the stories of Abr(ah)am, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. Climatologically speaking, the period before 1800 BCE is no place for the famine-dominated stories of the Hebrew patriarchs, whereas the timeframe after 1800 BCE is picture-perfect." See idem, "Tall el-Hammam Is Still Sodom," 12.

⁶⁰ Cf. *Did I Not Bring Israel Out of Egypt? Biblical, Archaeological, and Egyptological Perspectives on the Exodus Narratives* (James Hoffmeier, Alan Millard, and Alan Rendsburg, eds.; Bulletin for Biblical Research Supplements; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2016).

⁶¹ The biblical chronology which places the Exodus in the 15th century BCE is primarily based on 1 Kings 6:1 which dates the beginning of the construction of the Temple of Solomon to the 480th year from the Exodus. Another relevant source is Jud. 11:26, in which Jephthah the Judge, in his message to the king of the Ammonites, declares that Israel had been ensconced in the land for 300 years. Since Jephthah lived approximately a century before the monarchic period, ca. 1100 BCE, [cf. Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel* (Ada, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 170], 300 years brings us back to ca. 1400 BCE.

⁶² Ex. 12: 40.

⁶³ Ex. 6: 16–20.

⁶⁴ Cf. *Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai* 12:40; *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, 48; *Rashi*, Ex. 12:40; Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, Bekhor Shor, Nahmanides, Rabbeinu Avraham ben ha-Rambam, ad loc.

⁶⁵ Benno Jacob, *The Second Book of the Bible: Exodus* (2 vols., Walter Jacob, trans., Hoboken, N.J., Ktav: 1992), 2:1050.

Canaan and the Land of Egypt.” Josephus (*Antiqu.* II 15.2) taught: “They left Egypt 430 years after our patriarch Abraham had come to Canaan, while Jacob’s settlement there took place 215 years later.”

***Devarim*, the Re-giving of the Law in... Sodom**

We have seen that the opening verses of *Devarim* frame the book as a re-giving of the law and stress its geographical setting, which we now understand to be the ruins of Sodom. This reflects the very essence of *Devarim*’s message. Israel’s conquest and settlement of the land must be predicated on its commitment to establishing a just society. *Devarim* opens with this very message with its call for justice in its introductory chapter:

And I charged your judges at that time, “Hear the disputes between your people and judge fairly, whether the case is between two Israelites or between an Israelite and a foreigner residing among you. Do not show partiality in judging; hear both small and great alike. Do not be afraid of anyone, for judgment belongs to God. Bring me any case too hard for you, and I will hear it.” (Deut. 1: 16–17)

Yishayahu, in his inaugural words, which allude to the book of *Devarim*,⁶⁶ similarly presents the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah as the abject antithesis of a just society.

Unless the Lord Almighty had left us some survivors, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah. Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom; listen to the instruction of our God, you people of Gomorrah! (Is. 1:9–10)

The concluding orations of *Devarim* make it abundantly clear. Israel is faced with a fateful choice; to fulfill their mission of establishing a just society in the land, or to descend to the level of Sodom and Gomorrah and suffer a similar fate:

Your children who follow you in later generations and foreigners who come from distant lands will see the calamities that have fallen on the land and the diseases with which the Lord has afflicted it. The whole land will be a burning waste of salt and sulfur—nothing planted, nothing sprouting, no vegetation growing on it. It will be like the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim, which the Lord overthrew in fierce anger. All the nations will ask: “Why has the Lord done this to this land? Why this fierce, burning anger?” (Deut. 29: 22–24)

⁶⁶ Cf. Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Kimhi, and Abravanel on Is. 1:2.

Their vine comes from the vine of Sodom and from the fields of Gomorrah. Their grapes are filled with poison, and their clusters with bitterness. (Deut. 32: 32)

The re-giving of the law in Sodom ultimately shaped the way in which the message of the book of *Devarim* would be perceived. The medium is the message. Why, then, did the text refrain from clearly stating Israel's encampment upon the ruins of Sodom, settling instead for a list of obscure toponyms? To begin with, Israel's encampment at *Abel Shittim* took place hundreds of years after the destruction of the Pentapolis. By the time of the Exodus, it had been centuries since "Sodom" was a functioning toponym.

Our close reading of the opening verses of *Devarim* presented above, suggests a further explanation for the absence of a clear reference to Sodom. It was demonstrated that those verses share much in common with other poetic preambles to the giving of the law. Poetry is known for its penchant for obscuring far more than it reveals. Oftentimes in poetic verse, it is the unspoken yet blatantly implied word which points to its elusive presence. Literary critic Viktor Shklovsky coined the term "defamiliarization" to describe this poetic device:

We find material obviously created to remove the automatism of perception; the author's purpose is to create the vision which results from that de-automatized perception. A work is created "artistically" so that its perception is impeded, and the greatest possible effect is produced through the slowness of the perception.⁶⁷

By focusing our attention on Israel's precise topographical location, the opening verses of *Devarim* lead the attentive reader to consider the larger implications of the geographic setting. The re-giving of the Torah upon the ruins of Sodom imbues the book of *Devarim* with meaning. It is comparable to the Nuremberg Trials, whose location in the very same place that spawned the rise of the Third Reich was an inseparable and enduring part of its message. Similarly, establishing the book of *Devarim* on the ruins of Sodom symbolizes the dichotomy between the culture of Sodom and a society predicated on the precepts of the Torah, and dedicated to the pursuit of justice. ❧

⁶⁷ Victor Shklovsky, *Art as Technique. Literary Theory: An Anthology* (ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan; Malden: Blackwell, 1998), 19. Defamiliarization may be found throughout the Bible. Another example of defamiliarization specifically involving Sodom may be observed in Hos. 11:8, where Hosea compares Israel to Admah and Zeboiim instead of Sodom and Gomorrah, ironically, in order to emphasize their correlation with those very cities.