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THE MOABITE BACKGROUND OF DEUTERONOMY

I. THE QUESTION OF AUTHORSHIP

THE BOOK of Deuteronomy claims to record "the words which Moses spake" in various places towards the close of his life (i. 1), a claim which few modern scholars are willing to accept. Prof. Driver's *Introduction* and the popular text-books of Oesterley and Robinson, for example, follow the broad lines laid down by Graf, Wellhausen, Dillmann and other German scholars of the nineteenth century and attribute it to an unknown prophet of the seventh century, whom they denote by the symbol D. According to the popular theory, "Deuteronomy is a re-statement of earlier codes of law, cast in the form of discourses by Moses, and while not directly attributable to him, the book is written not only in his name but in his spirit¹."

It is generally assumed that D was a Judæan prophet interested in the centralisation of the national worship in Jerusalem.

In 1924 Prof. A. C. Welch published *The Code of Deuteronomy*, in which he challenged many points in this theory, threw back the date of the writing to the reign of Hezekiah, and ascribed the legislation to the early years of the monarchy. More recently, Prof. E. Robertson and Dr. R. Brinker have advocated as an alternative that the legislation was collected under Samuel's guidance, and that the book in its present form was produced soon after the death of Solomon. As Deuteronomy is rich in geographical references, it is the object of this article to see whether these do not postulate a closer acquaintance with the land of Moab than could be expected on the basis of the foregoing hypotheses.

II. THE LAND OF TRANSJORDAN

The country which is known to-day as Transjordan is roughly rectangular in shape, the longer sides running north

¹ C. A. Healing, *The Old Testament*, p. 114.

and south. On the west lies the whole length of the Jordan valley running down to the Dead Sea, and on the east, and parallel to it, is the edge of the Arabian desert. It is a mountainous district, with peaks rising to well over three thousand feet above sea-level. These mountains are bare and arid in the extreme south, but as we proceed northwards they give place to lofty table-lands of rolling country, which afford abundant pasture for sheep, oxen and camels, interspersed with considerable areas of fertile cultivated land.

The whole lofty region is intersected by deep valleys, caused by mountain torrents, which run mainly from east to west, so cutting the rectangle into a series of natural slices. At the time of the Exodus the southernmost of these sections was occupied by the children of Edom, and included the region around Mount Seir. As they refused the Israelites a passage through their territory, these were obliged to make a long detour in order to go round it (Deut. ii. 1). To the north of the Edomites, the children of Moab then occupied the land up to the river Arnon, which empties itself into the Dead Sea (ii. 24).

The next slice of territory, namely between the Arnon and the Jabbok (which runs into the Jordan opposite the vale of Shechem), was then under the rule of Sihon, king of the Amorites.

But it had only recently been conquered by him from the Moabites (Num. xxi. 26-31), who still regarded it as their own, which accounts for its being referred to as "the land of Moab" (i. 4, 5).

To the north of the Jabbok lay the country of Bashan, ruled over by Og, another Amorite king.

The book of Numbers describes how the Israelites, after they had compassed the land of Edom, travelled northwards along the border of the Arabian desert until they reached the territory of Sihon, when they engaged in a series of battles in which the two Amorite kings were overcome, settled two and a half tribes in their territories, and marched westwards until they came in sight of Jericho (Num. xxii. 1). When the book of Deuteronomy begins they were encamped in an upland ravine overlooking the deep valley of the Jordan (iii. 29).

III. THE PISGAH VIEW

In the year 1921 it was the privilege of the writer of this article to pay a visit to the C.M.S. hospital at Salt in Trans-

Jordan, travelling by way of Jericho and through a ravine like that in which the Israelite camp was placed. The town of Salt lies at the foot of a mountain range which culminates in Jebel Osha, the highest point of the district. According to Moslem tradition this is the peak from which Moses viewed the promised land, and in a depression near the summit a spot is pointed out as the site of his grave.

On the last day of our visit our little party set out very early on a morning of exceptional clearness and climbed to the summit. We were rewarded with a view comparable only with the most expansive that can be seen from some notable Swiss viewpoint under perfect atmospheric conditions.

Due north the snow-clad top of Mount Hermon stood out against the blue sky like a fleecy cloud, whilst in the middle distance were stretched out fertile hills and valleys, "all the land of Gilead" (Deut. xxxiv. 1). Somewhat to the west and much nearer we saw Mount Tabor and the Galilaean hills (Naphthali). To the north-west we looked right up the vale of Shechem and saw the white houses of Nablus sparkling in the hollow between the rounded tops of Ebal and Gerizim. Looking due west, we strained our eyes to see the distant Mediterranean, but here imagination had to play its part. Turning southwards, the whole range of the Judaeian hills bounded the horizon, from the Mount of Olives, which hid Jerusalem from sight, to the heights above Bethlehem and Hebron. More than five thousand feet below us lay the Jordan valley, the plain of Jericho, and the whole length of the Dead Sea, to the site of Zoar at its farther end. Beyond this was the vast region which is still known as the Negeb, or the "South".

Nothing could describe the view more exactly than the words of Deut. xxxiv. 2-3, and it seems impossible that this description could have originated with anyone whose feet had not stood upon this very spot.

Christian tradition, nevertheless, has fixed upon another site further to the south-east, which is now known as Jebel Neba, as the mount which Moses climbed. It possessed this name in the early centuries of the Christian era, but the connexion cannot be traced further back, and it may have arisen from a mistaken identification. This peak is considerably lower than Jebel Osha, twelve miles distant from the Jordan, and the panorama is distinctly more limited.

The objection has been raised to Jebel Osha that it is not "in the land of Moab", the northern boundary of which was the river Arnon. But this is equally the case with Jebel Neba, and the objection is based on a misconception.

It is clear from the narrative that the people never invaded the Moabite territory (ii. 9), but only that which they conquered from the Amorites, and it is there we must look both for the encampment and the mount of vision. When the narrator describes these as "in the land of Moab" (i. 5; xxix. 1; xxxii. 49; xxxiv. 5, 6), he uses these words in the sense explained above of the land which originally belonged to Moab. It may be noted that this description does not occur in Moses' discourses.

IV. ABARIM, NEBO AND PISGAH

When Moses was first warned of the manner of his death he was told to "get up into this mountain of Abarim and behold the land" (Num. xxvii. 12, R.V.); and in Num. xxxiii, which has all the appearance of a contemporary record, we are told that the people pitched their camp "in the mountains of Abarim before Nebo", which was their last encampment as they journeyed eastward until their final resting-place "by Jordan" (47-9). When the command is renewed in Deut. xxxii. 49 Moses is told to get up "into this mountain Abarim, unto Mount Nebo, which is in the land of Moab, that is over against Jericho".

Now Abarim is the plural of *'abar*, which means "across" or "beyond", so that "the mountains of Abarim" seem to denote a mountainous region which might be translated "the distant mountains" or "yonder mountains", and the camping ground would naturally be in one of the valleys. As distinct from this "Mount Nebo" is one particular mountain in the group. When we come to Deut. xxxiv. 1, the narrator drops the mention of Abarim and speaks of "Mount Nebo, to the top of (the) Pisgah which is over against Jericho".

A definite interest attaches to the fact that the mountain to be ascended is so variously described. There is variation, but no explanation, for those addressed are expected to understand; and there is no contradiction, for Abarim refers to the district, Nebo to the particular mountain, and, as we shall now see, Pisgah is a description.

The word Pisgah is particularly interesting, for it occurs only four times alone, namely, Num. xxi. 20; xxiii. 14; Deut. iii. 27; xxxiv. 1, and four times in combination, namely, Deut. iii. 17; iv. 49; Joshua xii. 3; xiii. 20. We are at once struck by the fact that in the former instances it is always accompanied by the article, "the Pisgah", which suggests that it is a common rather than a proper noun, and both its meaning and its use confirm this impression. It is derived from a root *pasag* which in Aramaic and in later Hebrew means "to cleave", and the LXX translates by *τοῦ λελαξευμένου* (the cloven) or in Deut. iv. 49 by *τὴν λαξευτήν* (the cleft). The Talmud represents it by *ramatha*, a common word for a hill (cf. Deut. iii. 17, A.V. margin). From this it appears that it represents a "cloven" or "broken" ridge, or a range of hill-tops presenting a broken or serrated sky-line. Now such an appearance is frequently seen in Transjordan, where the mountains are near at hand, but it is not without significance that the reverse is the case when the mountains of Moab are viewed from Judaea. The writer remembers having them pointed out to him from the windows of the Bishop Gobat school in Jerusalem, where in the blue distance they formed a long straight horizontal line against the sky.

If then the Pisgah is just a broken ridge, we may ask whether the same Pisgah is referred to on each occasion, and we are met with the need for a negative answer. For as we follow the narrative in Num. xxi (see *vv.* 4, 11, 12) they had only just completed their traverse of the desert of Arabia, referred to above, and reached the point where the eastern borders of Moab and the Amorites joined, whence they ascended a ridge overlooking the desert which they had just left behind (xxi. 20). In Num. xxiii. 14 "the Pisgah" seems to be a different one, for it is differently described. There is now no word of "the desert", but of the "field of Zophim" or "the watchers".

When we come to Deut. iii. 27 there is no note of place, but it is evidently the same as in Deut. xxxiv. 1, clearly stated to be "over against Jericho" and so a lofty mountain on the western edge of Moab, which we have already identified as Jebel Osha.

In Deut. iii. 17 and iv. 49 the Dead Sea is described as under Ashdoth-pisgah, or, if we choose so to translate it, "under the slopes of jagged ridges", which well describes the rugged rocks which rise out of the eastern bank of that sea.

These various descriptions are not inventions, and there is no reason to question their accuracy.

V. ANOTHER VIEWPOINT

Another view which has given rise to scholarly controversy is that described in Deut. xi. 30 (R.V.), where Moses pointed to Ebal and Gerizim and added, "Are they not beyond Jordan, behind the way of going down of the sun, in the land of the Canaanites which dwell in the Arabah, over against Gilgal, beside the oaks of Moreh?" Dr. Brinker is convinced that this passage has been "doctored" in order to glorify the sanctuary at Shechem, and that this Gilgal "could not possibly have been the one near Jericho".¹ But Prof. Driver more realistically says² that "from the assumed position of the speaker" the Arabah would lie before him, and as he looked westwards "the two mountains would be 'in front of' (i.e. over against) the well-known spot in the Jordan valley".

This is certainly the case; and if Gilgal had already been in his thoughts as a future camping place, the reference to it would be natural enough. Nor, if Moses had been the author of Genesis, would it be strange that the memory of Abraham's sojourn at Moreh should come to his mind; but this description of the scene is not in the least what one would expect in the composition of a Judaean writer many centuries later.

VI. "BEYOND JORDAN"

The river Jordan figures prominently in Deuteronomy, as we should expect if Moses wrote it. Of the twenty-six times when it is named no less than fifteen refer to the crossing of the river by the people, but not by Moses himself, which evidences how deeply this prohibition had entered into his soul. In iii. 17 the Jordan and its borders are included among the boundaries of the land assigned to the Reubenites and Gadites.

All the remaining ten instances contain the expression "beyond Jordan" (*eber ha-Yarden*), applied sometimes to the western and sometimes to the eastern bank.

This expression, and the fact that it is used in some cases of the eastern side, has been relied upon as proving that the author of Deuteronomy lived in Palestine, and as supporting

¹ *The Influence of Sanctuaries in Early Israel*, pp. 144, 147.

² *Introduction to Deuteronomy*, p. 133.

a late date. A closer examination, however, will show that, upon the whole, it is rather an indication of contemporary authorship. The conjecture that it was in common use in the days of the monarchy to denote the eastern half of the country, as we use trans-Jordan, has nothing to recommend it. The words nowhere occur in the two books of Kings, and in the only place where they are to be found in the prophets (Isa. ix. 1) the reference is to Galilee! In Chronicles they are used once of the eastern side (1 Chron. vi. 78; cf. Deut. iv. 43) and once of the western (1 Chron. xxvi. 30).

It should be noted that, whether alone or with a defining clause, they are used indifferently of *both* sides of the river. When used of the eastern side the A.V. usually translates "on this side Jordan", whilst the R.V. maintains "beyond Jordan". It is unfortunate, therefore, that in Num. xxxii. 19, where the Hebrew has the same expression "beyond Jordan" in both clauses, the R.V. obscures this by rendering first "the other side" and then "this side". In this verse and in many other cases distinctness is attained by adding some word such as "forward" (Num. xxxii. 19), "the way of the going down of the sun" (Deut. xi. 30) or "westward" (Joshua v. 1; xii. 7) for the one side, and "toward the sunrising" (Deut. iv. 41, 47) or "eastward" (Num. xxxii. 19) for the other. Therefore its use for both sides, and the frequent employment of these added distinctions, prove the words themselves to be neutral in character.

Prof. Driver admits as possible, but dismisses as unlikely, that the words were in use among the Amorites before the advent of the children of Israel.¹

Nevertheless there is much to be said for this view. There were Amorite settlements on the western side as early as Abraham's day (Gen. xiv. 13), and one of the first contacts of the people was with the Amorites of the south (Deut. i. 44). It is noticeable that the words "beyond Jordan" crop up constantly in connexion with the two Amorite kings, Sihon and Og (Deut. i. 5; iii. 8; iv. 46, 47; cf. Joshua xii. 1), and again rather surprisingly in Joshua v. 1; ix. 1; xii. 7, in regard to those on the western side, thus making it appear that they formed as it were two groups, distinguished as belonging to one or the other side.

¹ *Introduction to Deuteronomy*, p. xliii.

It is further evident that the writer of Deuteronomy was decidedly interested in the names used by the inhabitants of the country, for he goes out of his way to call attention to them (ii. 10-12, 20-2 ; iii. 9). It is therefore by no means improbable that the descriptions of those who were "across" or "beyond" Jordan go back to ancient times.

The antiquarian notices just referred to are admittedly archaic, and perfectly intelligible on the part of a writer who had just passed through Edomite, Ammonite and Moabite territory, and gazed from mountain peaks on the glistening snows of distant Hermon ; but surely not what we should expect from Samuel or a western writer whose chief interest was in the centralisation of worship in Jerusalem.

Reverting to the words "beyond Jordan", as found in Deuteronomy without addition, we observe that the narrator, who presumably had crossed the Jordan before the book was finally compiled, uses them only of the eastern side (i. 1, 5 ; iv. 46). Moses, on the other hand, uses them of the western side (iii. 20, 25), except in iii. 8, in describing the Amorite kings. In this latter instance its proximity to the following verse makes it uncertain whether Moses used a current phrase or whether the narrator so interpreted his meaning.

VII. THE PLAINS OF MOAB

The author of the closing chapter of Deuteronomy, in describing the scene of Moses' death, says that he "went up from [the plains (*araboth*) of Moab" (Deut. xxxiv. 1). Prof. Driver translates this "the steppes of Moab" and adds that, whereas D speaks of "the land (*'erets*) of Moab" (Deut. i. 5 ; xxxii. 49 ; xxxiv. 5, 6), the former expression is used only by P.

This conclusion is reached, however, by the drastic expedient of extracting the clause containing these words in Deut. xxxiv. 1 from its context, and assigning it to P, and again by excising a single verse (Num. xxii. 1) from a JE passage and giving that also to P. Even so, the use of "the land of Moab" in Deut. xxxii. 49 (P) has to be explained.

As a matter of fact, the meaning of the two expressions is quite distinct, and the appropriate use of each, and of a third word *mishor* (iii. 10 ; iv. 43), also translated "plain" (R.V. margin, "table-land"), is a definite evidence of local knowledge.

The "land", like our word "country", is a regional expression, which can be used of a wider or more restricted area. The word *'arabah* is descriptive of the *kind* of country, a plain which may be low-lying or elevated, generally carrying, like the word "steppe", a suggestion of comparative infertility. It is applied particularly to the plain which lies to the north and south of the Dead Sea, and in Deut. xxxiv. 1 to level ground raised somewhat above the Jordan valley. The word *mishor*, used in Deut. iii. 10 ; iv. 43 (cf. Joshua xiii. 9, 16, 17, 21 ; xx. 8 ; Jer. xviii. 8, 21), refers specifically to an elevated plateau or table-land and "when used in connexion with the east of Jordan, it has a special geographical sense", namely the highlands of Moab.¹

Prof. Driver, with some hesitation, assigns the brief section about the three cities of refuge (Deut. iv. 41-3) to a later editor, D₂, who knew of "a tradition which referred their appointment to Moses" and "desiderated an express notice in Deut. of the Transjordanic Cities of Refuge".² The interest in the Moabite country is evident, but this explanation leaves it unexplained why the tradition escaped the notice of D and his authorities, or whence D₂ derived sufficient interest in Transjordan at that late period to cause him to make this insertion in the sacred text. It is worth noting that three different words are used concerning these cities. Moses "separated" or "distinguished" (*badal*) them, then Joshua "sanctified" (*qadash*) them and "bestowed" (*nathan*) them upon their occupants (Joshua. xx. 7, 8).

Bezer is here described as in the "wilderness" (*midbar*), or open uncultivated land, which word might denote either wild uninhabited areas or the open country surrounding a town. In Joshua xx. 8 this description is repeated ; in Joshua xxi. 36, we have "Bezer and its suburbs (*migrash*)", which probably means the pasture-land surrounding the town.

We have, in Deut. ii. 26, mention of the "wilderness of Kedemoth", and in ii. 1, 8 notes of two other stretches of wild country through which the people journeyed. These touches of local colour would spring just as naturally to the lips of Moses in recounting their experiences as they would be forced and artificial in a prophetic composition written in his name for the purpose of commending the Deuteronomic law.

¹ Driver, *Introduction*, p. 52.

² *Ibid.*, p. 78.

VIII. RIVERS AND VALLEYS

Three rivers are mentioned in Deuteronomy, the Zered (ii. 13, 14), the Arnon (ii. 24) and the Jabbok (ii. 37). The two latter are well known, but the first is only mentioned elsewhere in Num. xxi. 12, where it is found in a list of camping grounds; whereas in Deuteronomy Moses treats it as an important stage of the journey which brought them to the borders of Moab and Ammon. He associates it with a city named Ar (Deut. ii. 18, 28; cf. Num. xxi. 15, 28), also mentioned only here and in Numbers. It is there associated with the river Arnon, of which the Zered may have been a tributary, but in both places it is said to be near "the border of Moab". A comparison of the two passages will show that, although there is no discrepancy, that in Deuteronomy is not solely derived from that in Numbers.

The word for these streams, sometimes translated "brook", sometimes "river", is *nahal*, and it is also translated "valley" (Deut. i. 26; ii. 13, 24; iii. 16; xxi. 4). Prof. Driver uses "torrent", and other writers use the modern Arabic word *wadi* or *wady* for these mountain streams, which are roaring torrents in the rainy season, but may even run dry in summer.

They often cause deep rifts, and the traveller treats the crossing of them as an event (Deut. ii. 13, 24). There are two other words which are translated "valley"; namely *gai*, which Driver renders "ravine", and *biq'ah*, which is used of the wide Palestinian vales (viii. 7; xi. 11) and the vale of Jericho (xxxiv. 3). In order to understand the differences it is to be noted that the word *gai* refers to a "dale" or "ravine" among the hills. So in Num. xxi. 19, 20, when the Israelites had left the desert track, a track where the remains of a Roman road may still be seen, they reached the "field", that is the cultivated ground of Moab, and ascended one of these ravines, on the way to the top of the ridge (*pisgah*).

We need not be surprised that Moses should be able to point to Ebal and Gerizim in the distance, and to Gilgal below (xi. 30), from his abiding place in a "valley" (iii. 29), when we remember that the *gai* specified was an upland dale, hundreds of feet above the Arabah, the Jordan plain below.

The third word, *biq'ah*, meaning "breach", denotes a wide valley between ranges of hills, such as that of Jericho, or the

fertile vales of Palestine (Joshua xi. 8) and Lebanon (Joshua xi. 17). These distinctions, which are obscured in our English versions, display an intimate acquaintance with the physical features of the land of Moab.

IX. PALESTINE AND TRANSJORDAN CONTRASTED

There is a difference of atmosphere between the two sides of the Jordan which it is difficult to convey in words, but the Scottish Highlander who came to live in London would appreciate it. Even the traveller can feel it. On the west are the ancient towns and cities, full of history, Jerusalem going back to the time of David, Ramah to that of Samuel, and Shechem to that of Abraham. There is the Mediterranean shore with its ancient port of Joppa, the Shephelah and lowland country round Lydda and the highlands stretching from Hebron by way of Bethlehem, Jerusalem, and Bethel to the wide valley of Jezreel; all settled country with comparatively good roads and communications, a land of olive trees and vineyards. But once the Allenby Bridge is passed, the scene changes; sheep and camels are seen grazing on the hills, with here and there a Bedouin camp in the valley, villages are much rarer, and the mountain road twists and turns in many a dangerous corner.

The busy life of the towns with their traffic and commerce is exchanged for the free life of the open country.

If anyone will first read the books of Kings, which describe the life of Palestine, and then read Deut. i-xi, he will realise that he has crossed the river and is in the land of Moab. Towns and houses are mentioned, largely with a future reference, but there is more about camping grounds, tents and armies on the move. When he comes to the "judgments" of chapters xii-xxvi which deal with injuries and pledges they are chiefly concerned with cattle and the simple possessions which a nomad people would carry with them. Those concerned with agriculture do not go beyond what would have arisen out of the actual settlement of two and a half tribes and the prospect of the occupation of the promised land.

A simple but striking illustration is found in the regulations for the killing and eating of animal food found in Deut. xii-xiv. Moses first deals with animals offered in sacrifice; these are holy unto Jehovah and therefore must be slaughtered at an altar dedicated to His Name, and free from all taint of heathenism.

He then goes on to say : " Notwithstanding thou mayest kill and eat flesh within all thy gates. Whatsoever thy soul lusteth after, according to the blessing of the Lord thy God which He hath given thee ; the unclean and the clean may eat thereof, as of the roebuck and as of the hart " (Deut. xii. 15 ; cf. xii. 22 ; xv. 22).

The question at once suggests itself, why are the roebuck and the hart selected as examples ? This is the first time these animals are mentioned in Scripture, and when we hear of them again, in 1 Kings iv. 23, they are cited as delicacies for King Solomon's table, whereas here they are assumed to be common food. Other references show that they are wild game inhabiting the mountains (2 Sam. ii. 18 ; Cant. ii. 9) and zoologists identify them with species of deer which inhabit the mountain ranges of the south and east of Palestine. The inference is inevitable that these words were spoken in a region where these animals were easily to be found, and at a time when the common people were accustomed to hunt them for food.

In Deut. xiv. 5 they are placed together again in the list of " clean " animals, and to them are added " the fallow deer and the wild goat and the pygarg and the antelope and the chamois ". Of these five the antelope is mentioned again in Isa. li. 20, but the other four nowhere else in Scripture, nor are any of these seven animals named in the list of clean meats in Lev. xi, which is attributed to P.

As the reader tries to picture them all, he must feel himself transported into the wild mountainous region over which they roam. It is the atmosphere of Transjordan once again.

In conclusion, it may be noted that, although so many places east of Jordan are specified, there is not a word about Shiloh or Ramah, so dear to the heart of Samuel, nor of Jerusalem or Bethel, which figure so much in the prophetic writings.

Some of these points may be of slight importance or of doubtful validity, but taken together they cannot lightly be dismissed. The Moabite background of Deuteronomy cannot be denied.

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