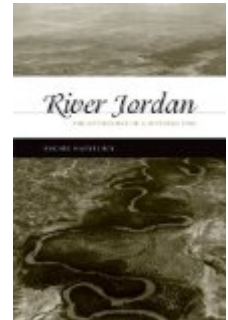


Rachel S. Havrelock. *River Jordan: The Mythology of a Dividing Line*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. xiii + 320 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-226-31957-5.



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The Jordan was a bountiful river in biblical times but useless for agriculture or commerce. Any attempt by Israelites to grow crops on its banks would have been frustrated by flooding. One can sense the disappointment: "The Jordan overflows all its banks during the harvest season" (Joshua 3:15). Unfortunately, the technological means of lifting water from this river to higher ground for irrigation had not yet been invented. Think of it--all that fresh water--the only major river in the land, flowing worthlessly into an acrid sea. Prosperity in The Land of Israel was almost entirely dependent on rainfall and therefore subject to drought.

Moreover, not only was the Jordan useless for agriculture, it was also a barrier that impeded east-west travel. A good part of the year the Jordan was dangerously swift, frigid, and too deep to ford. Even during autumn low flow there were few places for crossings. Nor was the river navigable. It meanders so much that it needs to flow over a path of two hundred miles from its headwaters near Mt. Hermon to its outlet at the Salt

Sea--a distance only about ninety miles as the crow flies. From the Kinneret to the Salt Sea not a single city was located on its banks. (Jericho, an oasis, is several miles from the Jordan and depends on a spring for its water supply--not the Jordan). The Israelites needed a miracle in order to cross from one side of this river to the other when first entering the Land. Unlike the Nile in Egypt, or the Tigris and Euphrates in Mesopotamia, the Jordan was never, nor could it ever be, the basis for civilization. Yet the Jordan was not without influence, especially in myth, both in biblical times and to this day.

Rachel Havrelock in her book *River Jordan: The Mythology of a Dividing Line* explores the effect the Jordan had on biblical narratives, and also the way this river is viewed now, both politically and religiously. The book is therefore both a commentary on selected texts of the Bible and a look at the Jordan in current Israeli-Palestinian affairs.

She begins with an examination of the two irreconcilable boundary descriptions of the Promised Land. On the one hand, Numbers 34 and Ezekiel 47 seem to favor the Jordan as a riparian border for the Land of Israel, but on the other hand, Genesis 15 and Exodus 23 seem to extend its territories to the Euphrates River. Why two maps? Numerous explanations have been offered for these differing territorial descriptions. Rabbi Joseph Schwarz, in his book on the geography of Palestine published in English in 1850 (available online), piously suggested that territory extending to the Euphrates was only held out as reward should the Israelites “live according to the will and commandments of God,” which was clearly unattainable in biblical times, and presumably in modern times as well.[1]

Havrelock sees merit in a study by Moshe Weinfeld suggesting that these boundary differences have their basis in differing textual sources. A narrow non-inclusive Priestly source may have rejected the east bank of the Jordan as legitimate Israelite territory, while a more open and expansionary Deuteronomistic school may have preferred to see boundaries extended to the Euphrates.

Alternatively, Havrelock offers her own idea that these differing mappings may represent a verbal “strategy of resistance.” The map with Jordan as a boundary configured the outer limits of the Land of Canaan as held at various times by the imperial ambitions of Egypt, while the map from the Euphrates south configured the imperial ambitions of Mesopotamian empires, mostly Babylon. It is as if the biblical authors were thumbing their noses at Egypt and its ambitions over the Land of Canaan (with the Jordan as a boundary), while also rejecting Babylonian influence south of the Euphrates, since this land was promised to Abraham.

Not much these days is said about the Promised Land of Israel extending to the Euphrates--what with Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria in

the way. However, these boundaries are still in the Good Book and thus continue to have interpreters. In 1988, Yasser Arafat, then chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization, claimed that an Israeli coin showed a map of “Greater Israel” reaching to the Euphrates, which to him represented Zionist expansionist goals.[2]

If the west bank of the Jordan was Israel proper, then according to the Bible, the east bank consisted of peoples and nations related to Israel, but evidently deviant from it. East bankers lived on the “other side of the tracks,” so to speak. Were the people of Sodom condemned in the biblical narrative because of sexual perversity? Havrelock argues that the principle defect of Sodom was greed. When Joshua crosses over the Jordan all the tribes go with him, but then the two and a half return to the east bank, becoming, as Havrelock suggests, the earliest example of Diaspora Jewry. The region of Gilead across the Jordan is both part of biblical Israel, and a site of uncertainty and tension. The narrative of Jacob at the Jabbok fits this characterization.

What was so appealing--but also degrading--about Moabite daughters? And given the condemnation of Moab, how are we to understand the story of Ruth, the Moabite? Havrelock sees the Book of Ruth as revolutionary. For the narrative suggests that foreigners can become part of Israel, and that there is a place for “women in the politics and economy of land ownership” (p. 63).

The Jordan also becomes the site of prophetic successions. At the Jordan Moses departs and Joshua becomes his successor. Elijah is taken up and Elisha becomes his successor. And in the New Testament John the Baptist gives way to Jesus. The Jordan is subject to two differing religious interpretations: a crossing of the Jordan as redemption, in Jewish thought; and immersion in its waters as rebirth, in Christian thought. The issue of Christian baptism is raised in the narrative of Naaman and Elisha, where the waters of the Jordan have a healing, and renewal, aspect. Havre-

lock searches out differences in interpretations of this narrative by the fathers of the early church, and the rabbis of the Talmud.

In the chapter titled “Two Maps,” the author refers to two texts in the Talmud, one (Berekoth 55a) concerns a disagreement among the rabbis about the Jordan as a boundary. Is the Jordan limited to the area downstream from Jericho to the Salt Sea? Or is the Jordan a river that descends from Mt. Hermon and crosses two seas before entering the Salt Sea? The second text of the Talmud (Baba Bathra 74b) offers a charming story about the waters of the Jordan descending into the mouth of the Leviathan. This story suggested a colorful explanation of why the Salt Sea did not increase in size, since it had no apparent way of absorbing the Jordan waters other than the mythical Leviathan. Another story links the waters of the Jordan with universal waters that encircle the earth and emanate from the four rivers of the Garden of Eden. Clearly the rabbis were given to fantasy about the Jordan.

The last two chapters in this book deal with the river as a border in Israeli and Palestinian national mythology, beginning with a discussion of the administrative districts of the Ottoman Empire and ending with transitions at the bridge over the river Jordan as it exists now. The book concludes with a discussion of “The Baptism Business,” the effort of three different sites to capture the interest of Christians who want to experience baptism in the Jordan. Will the Jordan ever become the bases for an international peace park, as has been proposed?

The author has in essence written two books. The first 217 pages function as a commentary on selected biblical texts loosely threaded together by myths about the Jordan. The following 70 pages deal with contemporary issues on boundary determination and baptismal tourism. Collectively, these successfully demonstrate that the Jordan can be a border, a place of spiritual transition, a divisive barrier, a subject of fantasy, and

an ecological wonder, or disaster. Any one of these themes could have been the one and only theme of a book. Unfortunately, together they do not make a coherent whole. Biblical scholars will, I think, be mostly interested in the first part of this book, on boundaries, on the story of Lot and Sodom, on Jacob and his relation as to Esau, on Moab and the Book of Ruth, on Elisha and Elijah. The author elicits new views about these familiar narratives. But this is not an easy book to read, as Havrelock offers subtle distinctions. Like the Jordan, some of her suggestions are difficult to traverse, but elsewhere her views are refreshing.

Notes

[1]. Joseph Schwartz, *A Descriptive Geography and Brief Historical Sketch of Palestine*, trans. I. Leeser (Philadelphia: A. Hart, 1850), 18.

[2]. On the “Ten Agorot Controversy” see, for example, Daniel Pipes, “Imperial Israel: The Nile-to-Euphrates Calumny,” *Middle East Quarterly* (March 1994), available at <http://www.danielpipes.org/247/imperial-israel-the-nile-to-euphrates-calumny>.

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