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The Jordan River Valley, the Jordan River and the Jungle of the Jordan

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Abstract:

This brief popular article provides a description of the southern Jordan Valley as a background for the excavation at Tall el-Hammam on the eastern Jordan Disk. It has previously appeared in several publications, and is republished here with permission from the author.



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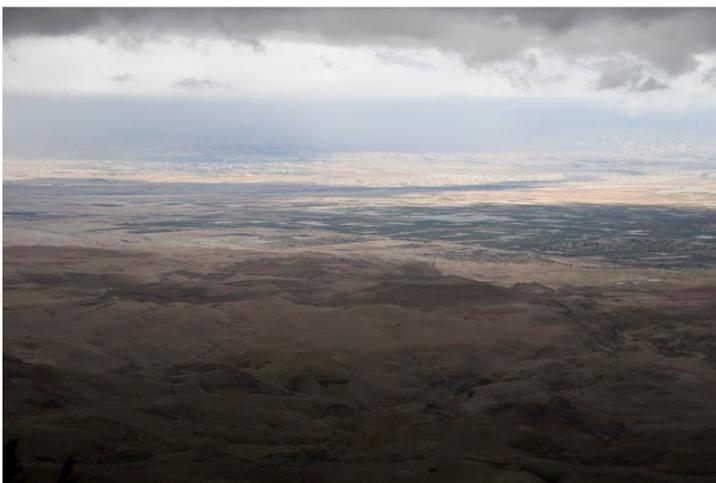
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Spending a month excavating in the Jordan Valley at Tall el-Hammam the past two winters caused me to rethink some of what I thought I knew about the region. Since this dig will continue for a number of years, I decided a better understanding of the geology, geography, and ecology of the area would help me better interpret our archaeological data. Hammam sits at the eastern edge of the valley, 14.5km east of the Jordan River itself, and 12km north of the Dead Sea. The following is what we know about the Jordan River Valley, the Jordan River and the Jungle of the Jordan ecosystem surrounding Tall el-Hammam.

The Jordan River Valley stretches 105km from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea, all below sea level. Enclosing the valley's entire length are the western mountains of Judah and Samaria and the eastern Jordan plateau. Rising to over 1,189m, these mountains keep the valley's temperature mild during the rainy winter season when we dig (Ibrahim 1992: 958).

Relatively flat, the floor of the Jordan Valley stretches from 3.2km wide in the north to 18km wide where it empties into the Dead Sea, near Tall el-Hammam (Ibrahim 1997:248). Referred to locally as the *ghor* (Arabic "bottom" or "depression"), most of the flat Jordan Valley on both sides of the river has been cultivated throughout history.



The southern Jordan Valley north of the Dead Sea as seen from Mt. Nebo.

The Jordan River Valley is an extension of the 6,000km earthquake fault line known as the Great African Rift Valley, running from Africa through the Red Sea's eastern finger (the Gulf of Aqaba) and Arabah to the Dead Sea (the lowest point on the earth's surface at 400m below sea level). It continues north through the Jordan Valley, Sea of Galilee, Hulah Valley and Beqah Valley, finally ending in southern Turkey (Thompson 1992a: 956; Rasmussen 1989: 20, 22). As part of this great fault line, the Jordan River Valley has experienced numerous earthquakes, many during the Biblical period.

Within the *ghor* of the Jordan Valley is a secondary valley, another 30-60m deeper, called the *zor* (Arabic "thicket"). This name points to the luxuriant green tropical growth through which the Jordan River twists and turns its way south. Calling it the "jungle of the Jordan," Glueck (1946: 63) noted that while the vegetation looks

attractively green, it is composed of rank varieties of thorns and thistles growing shoulder high. This is the Jordan's river bed, and it has constantly changed its course down through history. Maybe 1.6km wide in antiquity, the *zor* is greatly diminished today, only 1km at its widest.

The *zor* is probably what the Old Testament referred to as *ga'on hayarden*. From the verb *g'h* (Hebrew "to rise up"), it suggests the nouns "pride" or "swelling." Thus the KJV translated it: the "swelling of the Jordan" (Jer 12:5; 49:19; 50:44) and "pride of the Jordan" (Zech 11:3). The thought of the translators seemed to have been the river's springtime flooding of its banks.

Yet, knowing the geography and ecology of the region, and following the Arabic *zor* ("thicket"), the Jewish Publication Society translated each passage as the "jungle of the Jordan." The NIV translated it as "thickets of the Jordan" (while offering a note at each reference suggesting the alternate meaning of "flooding"). I agree with Thompson's (1992b: 960-961) summary that "jungle" or "thicket" is probably the best understanding of the writer's original meaning.



The present-day Jordan River channel just northwest of Tall el-hammam.

The boundary between the *ghor* and the *zor* is also a very distinctive feature. Here, stretching for a few hundred meters on both sides of the *zor*, are uniquely shaped eroded marl hills. Basically rounded by flowing flood waters through the centuries, these hills, called the *katar* (Arabic), are barren and generally uncultivable (Thompson 1992: 955).

Flowing within the *zor*'s full 105km length is the Jordan River, actually twisting and turning for a total of 218km.

Both deeper and wider in antiquity (Thompson 1992: 956), under normal conditions today the Jordan is never more than 30m wide (generally only a fraction of that) and less than 3m deep, due to the diversion by both Israel and Jordan of water that once flowed into it. But with springtime rains, the river can still overflow its banks, spilling out of the *zor* ("the jungle of the Jordan") and occasionally onto the *ghor* (the Jordan River Valley).

The river and *zor* provided an appropriate habitat for a surprisingly wide variety of wild animals in antiquity. Archaeological remains from some of the Jordan Valley's earliest sites suggest the region was once home to elephants, lions, hippopotami, rhinoceroses, leopards, boars, ibexes and alligators (Thompson 1992a: 955-956).

Because the river's continual descent and numerous rapids in the continually winding stream, it is questionable the Jordan was ever really navigable (Thompson 1992a: 958). Neither was it a river where cities grew up along its banks. The lack of evidence for any major settlements within the *zor* or the *katar* in antiquity was probably due to the river's annual flooding and continually changing river bed (Ibrahim 1997: 248). Because of the rain-shadow effect, which causes very minimal

rain on the east slopes of the Judean and Samaritan hills, there are fewer tributaries feeding into the Jordan River from the west. The same phenomenon provides only minimal rainfall in the Jordan Valley itself, but produces significant rainfall on the Jordanian hills, creating numerous tributaries flowing into the Jordan from the east. This abundance of runoff rain water from the Jordanian hills helps explain the far greater number of ancient settlements on the valley's east side (Thompson 1992a: 957). In the area of Tall el-Hammam three such rivers flowed from the Jordanian highlands: the Nimrin (Shu'eib), Kefrein, and Rameh (Hisban). Glueck (1946: 73) noted this was the area Lot viewed from Bethel-Ai in the Judean hills that was described "like the garden of God" (Gn 13:10).

In the location where these tributaries empty into the Jordan River, ancient fords were built up from deposited silt. Archaeological evidence suggests three such fords crossed the Jordan near Tall el-Hammam. The southernmost and probably main Jordan River ford at Makhdat (Arabic "ford") Hajla (preserving the Biblical name of Beth-hoglah) and a second ford to the north at el Ghoraniya (almost due east of Jericho) both had roads to Jericho. A third, the northernmost ford at Makhdat Mindisa, apparently did not connect directly with Jericho (Dorsey 1991: 202, 205). It is unclear how the ancients crossed the river, although they may have utilized boat and rope ferries as seen on the sixth century AD Madaba Map in this very area. Such ferries are a common sight crossing canals in Egypt still today. But the Jordan's swiftness may have rendered such a system unworkable. As far as we know, the Romans were the first to bridge the river (Thompson 1992a: 956-957).

The southern section of the Jordan Valley floor, where Tall el-Hammam is situated, is the valley's widest point. Called the *kikkar hayarden* (Hebrew "kikkar of the Jordan" in Genesis, Glueck (1946: 72) translated it as the "encircled Jordan Valley." The Tall el-Hammam Excavation Project (TeHEP) calls it the "Jordan disk," because here the flat River Valley widens into a circular appearance when viewed from above. This is the same region later called the "*arabah* (plains) of Moab" in Numbers and Deuteronomy.

Throughout history, habitation in the Jordan Valley has been a challenge. Settlers had to consider the availability of water, arable land, security, and a road system, as well as annual floods and periodic earthquakes. Tall el-Hammam was settled next to a hot spring (Arabic *hammam*), along one of the tributary rivers from the east (the Kefrein), adjacent to arable land and near the major north-south highway. But its location on the far eastern edge of the *kikkar* kept it away from floods and earthquakes.

Standing on the edge of the Tall each morning of the excavation and looking over the Jordan Valley, I couldn't help but wonder if I was standing in the very spot where Moses and the Israelites camped before entering Canaan. Behind me was Mount Nebo where Moses was buried and before me was the location of Israel's Jordan River crossing. I was within eyesight of both Elijah's translation to heaven in a whirlwind and John's baptism of Jesus. In the distance was the mound of the first city the Israelites captured in Canaan—Jericho. Here in the eastern Jordan River Valley, I was truly standing in the midst of the Holy Land.

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