

היכן נמצאת הארץ המובטחת?

אבנר רמו

In the Book of Deuteronomy we read about God's promise:

כי אם-שמר תשמרון את-כל-המצוה הזאת, אשר אנכי מצוה אתכם-לעשתה: לאהבה את-יהוה אלהיכם, ללכת בכל-דרכיו-ולדבקה-בו. והוריש יהוה את-כל-הגוים האלה מלפניכם; וירשתם גוים גדלים ועצמים מכם. כל-המקום אשר תדרך כף-רגלכם בו-לכם יהיה

“For if you shall diligently keep all this commandment which I command you, to do it, to love *YHWH* your God, to walk in all His ways, and to cleave to Him; Then will *YHWH* drive out all these nations from before you, and you shall dispossess nations greater and mightier than yourselves. Every place where on the sole of your foot shall tread shall be yours” (Deu 11:24; see also: Jos 1:3).

לא-ייתצב איש בפניכם: פחדכם ומוראכם יתן יהוה אלהיכם, על-פני כל-הארץ אשר תדרכו-בה,

“There shall no man be able to stand against you: *YHWH* your God shall lay the fear of you and the dread of you upon all the land that ye shall tread upon” (Deu 11:25).

However since leaving Egypt the sole of the feet of Israelites treaded upon vast stretches of land that never became theirs.

In the Book of Deuteronomy we also read:

פנו וסעו לכם ובאו הר האמרי ואל-כל-שכניו, בערבה בהר ובשפלה ובנגב, ובחוף הים-ארץ הכנעני והלבנון, עד-הנהר הגדל נהר-פרת. ראה נתתי לפניכם את-הארץ;

“Turn you, and take your journey, and go to the hill-country of the Amorites and to all the places nigh thereunto, in the Arabah, in the hill-country, and in the Lowland, and in the South, and by the sea-shore; the land of the Canaanites, and Lebanon, as far as the great river, the river Euphrates” (Deu 1:7-8).

ואמר אלכם: באתם עד-הר האמרי, אשר-יהוה אלהינו נתן לנו. ראה נתן יהוה אלהיך לפניך-את-הארץ: עלה רש, כאשר דבר יהוה אלהי אבתיך לך-אל-תירא ואל-תחת.

“And I said to you: you are come to the hill-country of the Amorites, which *YHWH* our God gives to us.

Behold, *YHWH* your God had set the land before you; go up, take possession, as *YHWH*, the God of your fathers, had spoken to you; fear not, neither be dismayed” (Deu 1:20-21).

Yet we read about the outcome of this endeavor:

ויצא האמרי הישב בהר ההוא לקראתכם, וירדפו אתכם, כאשר תעשינה הדברים; ויכתו אתכם בשעיר, עד-חרמה.

“And the Amorites, that dwell in that hill-country, came out against you, and chased you, as bees do, and beat you down in Seir, even to Hormah” (Deu 1:44).

If the outcome of the Israelites first attempt at **הר האמרי** - “the hill-country of the Amorites” was so dismal, the odds that they will take: **“and to all the places nigh thereunto, in the Arabah, in the hill-country, and in the Lowland, and in the South, and by the sea-shore; the land of the Canaanites, and Lebanon”**, seemed rather slim. Furthermore, If the Israelites could not overcome the Amorites, what chances did they have in mustering the land all the way to: **הנהר הגדל נהר-פרת** - “the great river, the river Euphrates” an area belonging to the contemporary Mesopotamian empire.

In the Book of Genesis we read:

ביום ההוא כרת יהוה את-אברם-ברית לאמר: לזרעך נתתי את-הארץ הזאת, מנהר מצרים, עד-הנהר הגדל נהר-פרת. את-הקיני, ואת-הקנזי, ואת הקדמני. ואת-החתי ואת-הפרזי, ואת-הרפאים. ואת-האמרי, ואת-הכנעני, ואת-הגרגשי, ואת-היבוסי.

“In that day YHWH made a covenant with Abram, saying: to your seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates; The Kenite, and the Kenizzite, and the Kadmonite; And the Hittite, and the Perizzite, and the Rephaim; And the Amorite, and the Canaanite, and the Girgashite, and the Jebusite” (Gen 15:18:21).

In the Book of Exodus we hear God telling Moses:

ויאמר יהוה, ראה ראיתי את-עמי אשר במצרים; ואת-צעקתם שמעתי מפני נגשיו, כי ידעתי את-מכאביו. וארד להצילו מיד מצרים ולהעלתו מן-הארץ ההוא, אל-ארץ טובה ורחבה, אל-ארץ זבת חלב ודבש-אל-מקום הכנעני, והחתי, והאמרי והפרזי, והחוי והיבוסי.

“And YHWH said: I have surely seen the affliction of My people that are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their pains; And I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good land and a large, to a land flowing with milk and honey; To the place of the Canaanite, and the Hittite, and the Amorite, and the Perizzite, and the Hivite, and the Jebusite” (Ex 3:7-8; see also: Ex 3:17).

While here the place of Hivite is also included, the lands of the Kenite, the Kenizzite, the Kadmonite, the Rephaim, and the Girgashite, had been deleted. Furthermore, this “Promised Land” is not described as stretching from: **“From the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates.”**

In addition, this is the first time that the “Promised Land” is described as: **“ארץ טובה ורחבה** - “A good land and a large”, and as: **“ארץ זבת חלב ודבש** - “A land flowing with milk and honey.” On the contrary, the land where Abraham and Isaac dwelled in was a parched and hostile place.

A further description of the “Promised Land” is also found in the Book of Exodus:

ושתי את-גבלך מים-סוף ועד-ים פלשתים, וממדבר עד-הנהר

“And I will set your border from the Red Sea even to the sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the River” (Ex 23:31).

The description of the “Promised Land” here has considerably changed from the one promised to Abraham, and it is now described as extending from the “Reed Sea” to the “Philistines’ seashore”, and from the “wilderness” to an unnamed “river.”

A somewhat similar description is found in the Book of Joshua:

מִן-הַשִּׁיחֹר אֲשֶׁר-עַל-פְּנֵי מִצְרַיִם, וְעַד גְּבוּל עַקְרוֹן צְפוֹנָה-לְכַנְעָנִי תַחֲשַׁב;

“From the Shihor, which is before Egypt, even to the border of Ekron northward--which is counted to the Canaanites” (Jos 13:3).

Yet in the Book of Deuteronomy we read:

מִן-הַמִּדְבָּר וְהַלְבָּנוֹן מִן-הַנְּהַר נָהַר-פְּרַת, וְעַד הַיָּם הָאֲחֵרוֹן-יִהְיֶה גְבֻלְכֶם.

“From the wilderness, and Lebanon, from the river, the river Euphrates, even to the hinder sea shall be your border” (Deu 11:24).



The Phoenician towns

Similarly in the Book of Joshua we find:

מִהַמִּדְבָּר וְהַלְבָּנוֹן הַזֶּה וְעַד-הַנְּהַר הַגָּדוֹל נָהַר-פְּרַת, כָּל אֶרֶץ הַחִתִּים, וְעַד-הַיָּם הַגָּדוֹל, מִבּוֹא הַשָּׁמֶשׁ-יִהְיֶה גְבוּלְכֶם

“From the wilderness, and this Lebanon, even to the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, and to the Great Sea toward the going down of the sun, shall be your border” (Jos 1:3-4).

והארץ הגבלי וכל-הלבנון מזרח השמש, מבעל גד, תחת הר-חרמון-עד לבוא חמת. כל-ישבי
ההר מן-הלבנון עד-משרפת מים, כל-צידנים-אנכי אורישם מפני בני ישראל:

“And the land of the Gebalites, and all Lebanon, toward the sun rising, from Baal-gad
under Mount Hermon to the entrance of Hamath;

All the inhabitants of the hill-country from Lebanon to Misrephoth-maim, even all the
Zidonians; them will I drive out from before the children of Israel” (Jos 13:5-6).

In these descriptions (Deu 11:24; Jos 1:3-4; 13:5-6) we hear for the first time that the “Promised
Land” contains the “Lebanon”, and “the land of Gebalites” (Byblos?), “Hamath” (Hamma?),
“Zidon”, the “Hinder sea” (?), the “Great sea”, and “all the land of the Hittites” (in
Anatolia?). There is no mention here of the river of Egypt or even Canaan, and it seems that this
Promised Land lies between Zidon in South Lebanon and south-eastern Anatolia.

This description is not unique, and many years later the Prophet Zechariah, who we are told was
prophesizing “in the second year of Darius” wrote:

וגברתי את-בית יהודה, ואת-בית יוסף אושיע, והושבותים כי רחמתים, והיו כאשר לא-
זנחתים: כי, אני יהוה אלהיהם-ואענם.

“And I will strengthen the house of Judah, and I will save the house of Joseph, and I will
bring them back, for I have compassion upon them, and they shall be as though I had not
cast them off; for I am *YHWH* their God, and I will hear them” (Zec 10:6).

והשבותים מארץ מצרים, ומאשור אקבצם; ואל-ארץ גלעד ולבנון אביאם, ולא ימצא להם.
“I will bring them back also out of the land of Egypt, and gather them out of Assyria; and I
will bring them into the land of Gilead and Lebanon; and place shall not suffice them” (Zec
10:10).



Moses Views the Promised Land, engraving by Gerard Jollain from the 1670 "La Sainte Bible"

In the Book of Deuteronomy we also find another description of a far more modest “Promised Land”:

ויעל משה מערבת מואב אל-הר נבו, ראש הפסגה אשר על-פני ירחו; ויראהו יהוה את-כל-הארץ את-הגלעד עד-דן

ואת כל-נפתלי, ואת-ארץ אפרים ומנשה; ואת כל-ארץ יהודה עד היס האחרון. ואת-הנגב, ואת-הככר בקעת ירחו עיר התמרים-עד-צער.

ויאמר יהוה אליו, זאת הארץ אשר נשבעתי לאברהם ליצחק וליעקב לאמר, לזרעך אתננה;

“And Moses went up from the plains of Moab to mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, that is over against Jericho. And *YHWH* showed him all the land, even Gilead as far as Dan; And all Naphtali, and the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, and all the land of Judah as far as the hinder sea;

And the South, and the Plain, even the valley of Jericho the city of palm-trees, as far as Zoar.

And *YHWH* said to him: 'This is the land which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying: I will give it to your seed' (Deu 34:1-4).

No mention here of the “Lebanon”, the “river Euphrates”, the “river of Egypt”, or the “Reed Sea.” Furthermore, there is no mountain in the Middle-East which affords a panorama from Jericho to the Gilead, not to mention to a place that is currently named “Dan.” If old Moses indeed could view from the top of a mountain all the land that God promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, it must have been a rather diminutive land.

The disparity between these descriptions of the “Promised Land” is beyond trivial. The differences are so great, that we may wonder whether they relate to the same land.

Another description of the “Promised Land” is also found in the Book of Deuteronomy:

כי יהוה אלהיך מביאך אל-ארץ טובה: ארץ נחלי מים-עינת ותהמת, יצאים בבקעה ובהר. ארץ חטה ושערה, וגפן ותאנה ורמון; ארץ-זית שמן, ודבש.

ארץ אשר לא במסכנת תאכל-בה לחם-לא-תחסר כל בה; ארץ אשר אבניה ברזל, ומהרריה תחצב נחשת

“For *YHWH* your God brings you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths, springing forth in valleys and hills;

A land of wheat and barley, and vines and fig-trees and pomegranates; a land of olive-trees and honey;

A land wherein you shall eat bread without scarceness, you shall not lack any thing in it; a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you may dig brass” (Deu 8:7-9).

This could hardly be the land that Abraham had to leave because of a “sore famine”, and go down to Egypt (Gen 12:10). Another famine occurred there in the days of Isaac (Gen 26:1), and it was in the “Promised Land” of the days of Jacob, that we are informed: **והרעב כבד בארץ** - “And the famine was sore in the land” (Gen 43:1). Because of that extended famine Jacob had to send his sons (in fact twice) to Egypt to buy food, and finally the whole Israelite clan had to relocate to Egypt.

In the Book of Joel we read:

ואת-הצפוני ארחיק מעליכם, והדחתיו אל-ארץ ציה ושממה-את-פניו אל-הים הקדמני, וספו אל-הים האחרון;

“But I will remove far off from you the northern one, and will drive him into a land barren and desolate, with his face toward the eastern sea, and his hinder part toward the western sea” (Joel 2:20).

The conventional understanding is that the seas that are mentioned in this verse are the Dead Sea and the Mediterranean Sea, respectively. But as between these seas is the Land of Canaan, it implies that the Prophet Joel characterized it as “**a land barren and desolate**” and not as “**A land flowing with milk and honey.**”

We hear Moses instructing the scouts:

וראיתם את-הארץ מה-הוא; ואת-העם הישב עליה-החזק הוא הרפה, המעט הוא אם-רב. ומה הארץ אשר-הוא יושב בה-הטובה הוא, אם-רעה; ומה הערים, אשר-הוא יושב בהנה-הבמחנים, אם במבצרים.

ומה הארץ השמנה הוא אם-רזה, היש-בה עץ אם-אין

“And see the land, what it is; and the people that dwell therein, whether they are strong or weak, whether they are few or many;

And what the land is that they dwell in, whether it is good or bad; and what cities they are that they dwell in, whether in camps, or in strongholds;

And what the land is, whether it is fat or lean, whether there is wood therein, or not” (Num 13:18-20).

It is clear that Moses had no clue about this “**Promised Land**”, let alone whether it was a land “**flowing with milk and honey.**”



Although we hear God telling Moses: **ועתה לך נחה את-העם, אל אשר-זברתי לך** - “And now go, lead the people to [the place] of which I have spoken to you” (Ex 32:34), it seems that Moses was not sure where this place was. In the following chapter we read about Moses’ answer: **ויאמר משה אל-יהוה, ראה אתה אמר אלי העל את-העם הזה, ואתה לא הודעתני את אשר-תשלח עמי;**

“And Moses said to *YHWH*: See, You say to me: Bring up this people; and You did not let me know whom You will send with me” (Ex 33:12).

The conventional understanding of this verse is that Moses asks God to tell him who will be God's messenger that will lead the people to the Promised Land, but in the previous verse God ordered Moses himself to lead the people on their way. However, this may not be a case of misunderstanding between God and Moses but between the writer of these verses and a scribe who copied this text.

The combination of words **תשלח עמי** (*thishlakh I'mi*) which were translated as “**send with me**” appears in the Bible only once more (Neh 2:9). Furthermore, this is the only instance where the word **עמי** - “**with me**” appears in the Book of Exodus. On the other hand we find in this book the phrase: **שלח עמי** - “**send my people**” (Ex 8:16; 10:3). It is therefore suggested, that prior to the late scribe “intervention” the whole phrase was: **אל אשר-תשלח עמי** - “to where You will send my people.” Moses was not asking God “who will be sent with him” but “to where You are sending my people.”

Therefore, it is also not surprising to hear Moses beseeching the Midianite Hobab:

**ויאמר, אל-נא תעזב אתנו: כי על-כן ידעת, חנתנו במדבר, והיית לנו לעינים.
והיה כי-תלך עמנו: והיה הטוב ההוא, אשר ייטיב יהוה עמנו-והטבנו לך**

“**And he said: Leave us not, I pray you; forasmuch as you know how we are to encamp in the wilderness, and you shall be to us instead of eyes.**

And it shall be, if you go with us, yea, it shall be, that what good so-ever YHWH shall do to us, the same will we do to you” (Num 10:31-32).

Canaan was a territory within the Egyptian realm of influence and sometimes they even controlled it. There are historic records indicating that the Egyptian army got there on several occasions after a two week march. Therefore, the location of Canaan must have been known to Moses. Yet it seems that Moses did not know where the land “**flowing with milk and honey**” was. Obviously hearing Moses' instructions to the scouts and his pleading with Hobab, must have installed doubt among the Israelites whether Moses told them the truth about the “Promised Land” or whether he was in fact leading them to oblivion.

In the first part of the 17th century AD, Father Jeronimo Lobo, a Portuguese missionary, wrote about his experience in Northern Ethiopia: “The great quantity of honey that is gathered, and a prodigious number of cows that is kept here, have often made me call Abyssinia, a land of honey and butter” (Jeronimo Lobo. A voyage to Abyssinia. Translated by Samuel Johnson. 1788. Reprinted by AMS Press Inc. New York. 1978).



The concept is central to **Zionism**. In 1896, Herzl exhorted Jews to take up the movement, writing "for these have never lost the faith in the Promised Land".

On June 16, 1895, Theodore Herzl wrote in his diary: "No one ever thought looking for the Promised Land where it actually is - and yet it lies so near. This is where it is: within ourselves! ... The Promised Land is where we carry it."