

ELON THE ZEBULUNITE OF AIJALON: AN HISTORICAL THEORY

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The ten-year reign of Elon the Zebulunite, the eleventh judge of Israel, from approximately 1087 to 1077 BCE, is relayed in two terse bare-boned verses: *After him* [Ibzan of Bethlehem], *Elon* [EYLON] *the Zebulunite .. judged Israel for ten years. Then Elon the Zebulunite died and was buried in Aijalon* [AYALON], *in the territory of Zebulun* (Judg. 12:11-12).

The only information that can be gleaned superficially from this sparse narrative is that there was once a judge from the tribe of Zebulun who judged Israel for ten years and who was buried in one of his tribe's ancestral villages. If, however, one delves more deeply into the tribal milestones and ancestral histories of both Zebulun and Dan, the above verses might actually transmit important historical information not mentioned anywhere else in the Bible. It concerns the fluidity of these tribes' ancestral land allotments, migrations, and relocations within Israel during the gradual conquest of the land from the time of Joshua to that of Samuel.

ONE OR TWO AIJALONS?

On the basis of these verses in Judges, one might surmise that there were two distinct cities called Aijalon: one in the territory of Zebulun, as mentioned above, and another in the tribal land of Dan, as mentioned in Joshua (19:40-48). Having two different cities with the same name in different tribal territories would, at first glance, mirror a similar situation recorded during the judgeship of Ibzan, Elon's predecessor. The text uncharacteristically fails to give Ibzan's tribal affiliation and merely names Bethlehem as his city of origin (Judg. 12:10). The reader is left pondering whether he came from Bethlehem-Judah or Bethlehem-Zebulun (Josh. 19:15).

In contrast, the text definitively identifies Elon as belonging to the tribe of Zebulun, and further identifies his place of burial, Aijalon, as definitively located in the territory of Zebulun, leaving us with the impression that (just

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like the city of Bethlehem) there were two separate Aijalons; one located in Zebulun and the other in Dan.

A careful reading of the Bible dispels this mistaken impression. The specific cities allotted to the tribes of Dan and of Zebulun are clearly spelled out earlier in the Book of Joshua. With respect to Dan's allotment:

The seventh lot fell to the tribe of the Danites, by their clans. Their allotted territory comprised: Zorah, Eshtaol, Ir-Shemesh. Shaalabbin, Aijalon [AYALON], Ithlah, Elon [EYLON], Timnah and Ekron . . . But the territory of the Danites slipped from their grasp [va-yetze me-hem]. So the Danites migrated and made war on Leshem. They captured it and put it to the sword; they took possession of it and settled in it. They changed the name of Leshem to Dan, after their ancestor Dan. That was the portion of the tribe of the Danites, by their clans, those towns, with their villages (Josh. 19:40-48).

The text reproduced above shows that the tribal allotment to Dan included both a city named Aijalon and one called Elon. These two names may be pronounced differently, but they have the exact same spelling in Hebrew. From this we can deduce that these two names are not only related to each other but also commonly associated with the tribe of Dan.

With respect to Zebulun's allotment:

The third lot fell to the Zebulunites, by their clans. The boundary of their portion, starting at Sarid, ascended to Maralah, reaching Dabbesheth and the wadi alongside Jokneam. It also ran from Sarid along the eastern side, where the sun rises, past the territory of Chisloth-tabor and on to Daberath, and ascended to Japhia. From there it ran [back] to the east, toward the sunrise, to Gath-hepher, to Eth-kazin, and on to Rimmon, where it curved to Neah. Then it turned, that is the boundary on the north, to Hannathon. Its extreme limits were the Valley of Iphtah-el, Kattath, Nahalal, Shimron, Idalah, and Bethlehem: twelve towns, with their villages. That was the portion of the Zebulunites by their clans, those towns, with their villages (Josh. 19: 10-16).

Of the many towns (or "cities") allotted to Zebulun, neither Aijalon nor Elon is mentioned. We can therefore surmise that these names are exclusive to Dan and have no connection with Zebulun.

There is just one scriptural source for the names Elon and Aijalon being in any way related to the tribe of Zebulun, two sentences describing Elon the Zebulunite's judgeship and burial in Aijalon (Judg. 12:11-12). The connection between these two words suggests that the city of Aijalon (AYALON) might have been named after a personage, Elon (EYLON).

AIJALON-ZEBULUN = AIJALON-DAN

It is hypothesized that the Aijalon mentioned in Judges as located in the territory of Zebulun was not in fact a different city from Aijalon of Dan, but the very same place, and that Aijalon at the time of Elon's judgeship was a satellite town of Zebulun under its domain. Thus Aijalon-Zebulun and Aijalon-Dan are distinguished temporally, but not geographically. One of the purposes of the text detailing Elon's judgeship may have been to fill a historical gap, unrecorded elsewhere in the Bible, regarding the temporary status of Aijalon during the lifetime of Elon the Zebulunite.

The displacement and replacement of Aijalon's population was not a phenomenon restricted to the tribes of Dan and Zebulun. At various times, Aijalon had any number of different inhabitants. Following its conquest by Joshua and allocation to Dan, Aijalon was designated as one of the Levitical cities given to the Kohathites (Josh. 21:24 and I Chron. 6:54). Though located within the territorial allotment of Dan, it was in fact a city of the Levites. At a later stage, the Amorites displaced the Danites of Aijalon, at least temporarily: *The Amorites pressed the Danites into the hill country; they would not let them come down to the plain. The Amorites also persisted in occupying Har-heres, Aijalon, and Shaalbim. But the hand of the House of Joseph bore heavily upon them, so they became tributary* (Judg. 1:34-35). The area was now under the control of Joseph.

In still later years, we find that Aijalon was ruled by the tribe of Benjamin: *And Beriah and Shema [descendants of Benjamin] were clan chiefs of the inhabitants of Aijalon, who put to flight the inhabitants of Gath* (I Chron. 8:13). This acquisition is further confirmed during the time of Rehoboam: *Zorah, Aijalon, and Hebron, which are in Judah and in Benjamin, as fortified towns* (II Chron. 11:10).

TRANSFER OF AIJALON FROM DAN TO ZEBULUN

The biblical language employed in the Judge Elon narrative establishes Zebulun's tribal rights to the previously Danite Aijalon in three ways: 1) The name Elon is appropriated from Danite nomenclature via the phrase "Elon the Zebulunite," thus transforming the name Elon into a Zebulun patronymic. 2) Elon, a prestigious judge, is buried in what is now his eponymous Zebulunite city of Aijalon, officially appropriating that town's name for Zebulun. 3) Aijalon is now officially, and perhaps legally, called "the Land of Zebulun," thereby proclaiming the transfer of property ownership from one tribe to the other. This may well have occurred peacefully, owing to Dan's gradual depopulation in the area and its migration north.

The Danites' weak grasp on their southern territorial allotment is explicitly mentioned at an early stage in their history. Even in the days of Joshua it is said that the Danites' territory *slipped from their grasp* [va-yetze me-hem], indicating that they were unable to keep a firm hold of their allotment, for reasons not specified at the time, and that they migrated north and conquered Leshem, renaming it Dan (Josh. 19:40-48). This migration is described in detail in chapter 18 of Judges. The northern location of Dan is even alluded to by Moses in his blessing: *Dan is a lion's whelp that leaps forth from Bashan* (Deut. 33:22). Bashan is in the north. Furthermore, before the death of Moses, God shows him all the land, beginning with the northernmost portion: *Gilead as far as Dan* (Deut. 34:1).

DAN'S MIGRATIONS: THREE SEPARATE LOCATIONS

By combining the two separate historical accounts in Joshua and Judges that record Dan's northern migration, it seems probable that this move began almost immediately in the time of Joshua. We find that the tribe of Dan had three locations: 1) its original one in the south; 2) the Camp of Dan at Kir-iath-jearim in the land of Judah (Judg. 18:12); and 3) the northern region to which they migrated.

The diminishing importance of the tribe's original location in the south and its inability to maintain control over these territories can be confirmed by analyzing the story of Dan's most prominent figure, the judge and hero Samson.

Samson's Danite father, Manoah from Zorah, is described as being *of the stock of Dan* (Judg. 13:2). He is not identified as a man from the land of Dan,

but as one belonging to the family of Dan. Furthermore, of Samson it is said that *the spirit of the Lord first moved him in the encampment of Dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol* (Judg. 13:25). Thus even Samson, the tribe's most prominent personality, is living in "the encampment of Dan," an outpost in the land of Judah, at a time that seems chronologically earlier than that of the narrative detailing the Camp of Dan in Judah (Judg. 18:11-12). Even though verse 12 seems to show that the Camp of Dan was a temporary outpost on the journey north, the Samson narrative indicates that it was a Danite satellite for quite some time.

The lack of centralized Danite authority is notable throughout the story of Samson. Every heroic deed of his he undertakes alone, without consulting his parents or the tribal elders, and with no Danite troops to back him. This lone Danite wages a one-man war against the Philistines (Judg. 15-16.)

When the Philistines set out to capture Samson, where do they look for him? In Judah: *Then the Philistines came up, pitched camp in Judah and spread out over Lehi* (Judg. 15:9). Who blame Samson for this Philistine incursion? The Danites? No! The Judahites: *Then three thousand men of Judah went down to the cave of the rock of Etam, and they said to Samson, 'You knew that the Philistines rule over us, so why have you done this to us?'* (Judg. 15:11).

Why, throughout the Samson story, is there not a single word or mention of his fellow Danites? What accounts for his radical independence? The most likely reason is that the majority of the Danite population, along with their leadership and authoritarian power, had already relocated north, as first documented in Joshua and later retold (in greater detail) in Judges after the Samson story. That Dan's conquest of Laish postdated the Samson episode is a mistaken impression, as the earlier documentation in Joshua clearly indicates. Repeating and rehashing the story of Dan's migration at the end of Judges was not meant to establish chronology but to comment homiletically on the immoral state of the nation at a time when there was no king in Israel and every man did as he pleased.

DAN AND ZEBULUN: THE PARALLEL MIGRATION OF TWO MARITIME TRIBES

Out of all the tribes of Israel, only Dan and Zebulun shared the characteristic of a maritime people. This was the theme of Jacob's blessing for Zebulun,

that he *shall dwell by the seashore and be a haven for ships* (Gen. 49:13). Both tribes gained access to the Mediterranean: Zebulun from the northern coastal city of Nahalal (Josh. 19:15), and Dan (initially) from the southern coastal city of Joppa. Deborah recognizes their seafaring similarities, and compares and contrasts them in her song. While they both sail the seas, Zebulun is praised and Dan is criticized. She castigates Dan for not participating in the war against the Canaanites: *Dan, why did he linger by the ships?* (Judg. 5:17); but extols Zebulun for taking part: *Zebulun is a people that looked death in the face* (Judg. 5:18).

Since both tribes shared access to the Mediterranean, both may have traveled up and down the Mediterranean coast in opposite directions, back and forth, from their points of origin to their points of return. These expeditions exposed them to new opportunities, new vistas, new lands ripe for conquest, and also to possible relocation.

Dan migrated north, probably by sea, owing to pressure from the Amorites and Philistines. After capturing Laish/Leshem, the Danite made it their secondary and, in time, their primary residence. As seafaring adventurers, the Zebulunites most probably traded with other Israelite tribes along the Mediterranean littoral, perhaps even with the Philistines, sailing from north to south as far as Joppa in Dan. There they may have become aware of the sparsely populated town of Aijalon farther inland, seizing the opportunity to colonize and claim it for themselves during the time of Elon or possibly even earlier. This town was ultimately absorbed in the territory of Benjamin (II Chron. 11:10).

In the absence of archaeological evidence specifically relating to the settlements (or resettlements) of Israelite tribes which have never been, and are unlikely to be, excavated, we can only rely on the wealth of linguistic clues dispersed throughout the Bible in order to logically piece together the dynamic nature of ancient Israel's tribal borders and possible migrations. In summary, a microscopic biblical analysis of two brief scriptural verses describing Elon, a minor judge, juxtaposed with the many other biblical sources related to Dan and Zebulun as described above, may shed light on ancient Israel's intertribal migration patterns and periodic shifting tribal borders, thus highlighting the nation's internal vigor, dynamic complexity, and survival strategies.



עשה תורתך קבע

THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR

DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ

October	Micah	7
	Nahum	1 – 3
	Habakkuk	1 – 3
	Zephaniah	1 – 3
	Haggai	1 – 2
	Zechariah	1 – 14
	Malachi	1 – 2
November	Malachi	3
	Psalms	1 – 27
December	Psalms	28 – 55
January	Psalms	56 – 83
February	Psalms	84 – 111

