

## BETWEEN THE RIVERS ARNON AND JABBOK

### REUVEN CHAIM (RUDOLPH) KLEIN

In analyzing the Bible's account of the Israelites' early encounters with the Amorites (under the leadership of Sihon, king of Heshbon), one will notice that there is seemingly a contradiction between the account in Numbers and the account in the book of Judges. From Numbers, it seems that the area between the rivers Arnon and Jabbok was originally Moabite territory, and was subsequently conquered by Sihon, who in turn lost the land to the Israelites. However, when the book of Judges recounts this incident in a dialog between Jephthah and the king of Ammon, it seems that the territory had originally belonged to the Ammonites, not the Moabites. In Numbers, the Bible states:

*From thence they journeyed, and pitched on the other side of the Arnon, which is in the wilderness, that cometh out of the border of the Amorites. For Arnon is the border of Moab, between Moab and the Amorites . . . And Israel sent messengers unto Sihon king of the Amorites, saying: 'Let me pass through thy land; we will not turn aside into field, or into vineyard; we will not drink of the water of the wells; we will go by the king's highway, until we have passed thy border.' And Sihon would not suffer Israel to pass through his border; but Sihon gathered all his people together, and went out against Israel into the wilderness, and came to Jahaz; and he fought against Israel. And Israel smote him with the edge of the sword, and possessed his land from the Arnon unto the Jabbok, unto the children of Ammon; for the border of the children of Ammon was strong. And Israel took all these cities; and Israel dwelt in all the cities of the Amorites, in Heshbon, and in all the towns thereof. For Heshbon was the the city of Sihon the king of the Amorites, who had fought*

*Rabbi Reuven Chaim (Rudolph) Klein is the author of Lashon HaKodesh: History, Holiness, & Hebrew (Mosaica Press, 2014). He received rabbinic ordination from Rabbis Moshe Sternbuch, Zalman Nechemia Goldberg, and Yosef Yitzchak Lerner. He has published in several journals including Jewish Bible Quarterly, Kovetz Hamaor, Kovetz Kol HaTorah, and Kovetz Iyun HaParsha.*

*against the former king of Moab, and taken all his land out of his hand, even unto the Arnon (Num. 21:14–26).*

From this passage, it seems that the Moabites originally lived on both sides of the Arnon River. At some point, the Amorites overran the Moabites and conquered all of their territory between the Arnon and the Jabbok. When the Amorites later fought with the Israelites, the Israelites defeated them and assumed control of that territory. Thus, the land between Arnon and Jabbok had originally belonged to the Moabites.

However, from the telling of this story in Judges, it seems that the land between Arnon and Jabbok originally belonged to the Ammonites. The king of Ammon demanded that Jephthah return the land to the Ammonites *because Israel took away my land, when he came up out of Egypt, from the Arnon even unto the Jabbok, and unto the Jordan* (Judg. 11:13). Jephthah responded by explaining that the Israelites had never fought with the Moabites directly over that territory; they had conquered it from Sihon. This exchange implies that the territory between Arnon and Jabbok had originally belonged to the Ammonites, not (as Numbers attests) to the Moabites. As Jephthah said:

*'They came not within the border of Moab, for the Arnon was the border of Moab. And Israel sent messengers unto Sihon king of the Amorites, the king of Heshbon; and Israel said unto him: Let us pass, we pray thee, through thy land unto my place. But Sihon trusted not Israel to pass through his border; but Sihon gathered all his people together, and pitched in Jahaz, and fought against Israel. And the LORD, the God of Israel, delivered Sihon and all his people into the hand of Israel, and they smote them; so Israel possessed all the land of the Amorites, the inhabitants of that country. And they possessed all the border of the Amorites, from the Arnon even unto the Jabbok, and from the wilderness even unto the Jordan. So now the LORD, the God of Israel, hath dispossessed the Amorites from before His people Israel, and shouldest thou possess them?'* (Judg. 11:18-23).

## SIHON “PURIFIED” THE LANDS OF AMMON AND MOAB

The Talmud (TB *Gittin* 38a, *Hullin* 60b, *Sanhedrin* 94b) asserts “[the lands of] Ammon and Moab were ‘purified’ through Sihon.” The Israelites were commanded to refrain from warring with Ammon and Moab and from conquering their lands. However, according to the Talmudic statement above, they could freely conquer lands which had once belonged to Ammon and Moab but were currently under the control of the Amorite king Sihon.

A literal reading of the Talmud implies that Sihon conquered land from both Ammon and Moab; and that the Israelites conquered those territories from him. While the Torah explicitly mentions that Sihon conquered Moabite territory, it does not explicitly mention that he conquered Ammonite territory.

Rashi (to TB *Gittin* 38a) cites the abovementioned exchange between Jephthah and the Ammonite king as the Talmud’s source for the assumption that Sihon conquered land from Ammon. Additionally, Rashi (to TB *Hullin* 60b) cites another scriptural basis for the notion that Sihon had conquered land from Ammon, *And their [the Tribe of Gad’s] border was Jazer, and all the cities of Gilead, and half the land of the children of Ammon, unto Aroer that is before Rabbah* (Josh. 13:25). The fact that the Tribe of Gad conquered part of Ammonite land shows that that area previously belonged to Sihon who conquered it from the Ammonites (because, as mentioned above, the Israelites were barred from warring with Ammon and Moab directly). Naḥmanides (to Num. 21:26 and 22:4) also cites these two sources in connection with his assumption that Sihon conquered land from the Ammonites.

According to this view, the territory between the rivers Arnon and Jabbok was originally under the control of both Ammon and Moab. It is likely that the western part of that territory (i.e. the area closer to the Jordan River) belonged to Moab, while the eastern part of that territory (i.e. closer to where Amman, known in the Bible as Rabbath Ammon, lies today) belonged to Ammon. In light of this, we can resolve the conflict between Numbers and Judges regarding ownership of the land between Arnon and Jabbok: both

Ammon and Moab held portions of that land and both of them lost their portions to Sihon. Thus, there is no contradiction: Numbers focuses exclusively on the Moabites who lost land to Sihon; while Judges mentions the Ammonites as well as the Moabites.

R. Meyuhas b. Eliyahu (a 13<sup>th</sup> century Greek exegete) adds that the Bible sometimes refers to Ammonite lands as “Moabite” because Moab was the older<sup>1</sup> brother of Ammon (see Gen. 19:30–38).<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, even though Numbers does not explicitly mention that Sihon conquered Ammonite territory, that territory is included in the conquered Moabite territory.

#### THE KING OF AMMON DEMANDS MOABITE TERRITORY

The classical commentators R. David Kimhi and Abarbanel (in their respective commentaries to Judg. 11) ask why Jephthah responded to the Ammonite king by saying that the Israelites had never taken land from either Moab or Ammon. The king of Ammon only requested land which had previously belonged to *his* nation, but he did not say anything about Moab. They explain that the king of Ammon requested that the Israelites relinquish the entire region between Arnon and Jabbok, which he claimed had historically been Ammonite territory. Jephthah responded with two arguments: First, that the land between Arnon and Jabbok had historically not belonged to Ammon, but to Moab. Second, that the Israelites had not conquered that land directly from Moab, but from Sihon (who conquered it from Moab). Once the Moabites had lost that land to Sihon fair and square, they could not justifiably lay claim to that land centuries later.

It seems that Kimhi and Abarbanel are suggesting a different way of reconciling Numbers and Judges: When the king of Ammon demanded the land between Arnon and Jabbok, he was actually requesting a land which had not historically belonged to his people, demanding that which did not rightfully belong to his nation. This represents a new way of reconciling the contradiction: Sihon never conquered Ammonite territory, even though the king of Ammon demanded that the Israelites return such land.

This explanation accounts for the ownership of the land between Arnon and Jabbok, and for why Jephthah mentioned the Israelites' peaceful history with the Moabites.

#### MOABITES CONQUERED AMMONITE LAND BEFORE SIHON

R. Hayyim Paltiel (a 13<sup>th</sup> century German commentator), also notes the contradiction between Numbers and Judges concerning the original ownership of the land between Arnon and Jabbok. He posits that originally that stretch of land belonged to the Ammonites, and later to the Moabites who conquered it. Afterwards, Sihon conquered the land from the Moabites (and the Israelites conquered it from Sihon). Hence, the account in Numbers reflects the reality at that time, i.e. that Sihon had conquered the land from Moab; while in Judges, the king of Ammon demanded that Jephthah cede that area because it had historically belonged to Ammon.

Even though R. Hayyim Paltiel does not explain Jephthah's response, it is fair to assume that Jephthah replied that the Ammonites can no longer lay claim to that land after it changed hands multiple times (first to the Moabites, then to the Amorites, and finally to the Israelites). This explains why Jephthah referred to Chemosh—the national idol of Moab – when speaking to the Ammonite king. The idol Chemosh was originally Ammon's national idol. When Moab overran Ammon and conquered parts of their territory; they also “conquered” their god and adopted it as their own. R. Hayyim Paltiel also fails to explain why Jephthah mentioned the Moabite king Balak when responding to the Ammonite king, but the explanation can be similar to the one above.

#### AMMON AND MOAB AS BROTHER NATIONS

When telling of the various nations' reactions to the parting of the Red Sea, it is stated, *The mighty men of Moab, trembling taketh hold upon them . . .* (Ex. 15:15). In Nahmanides's commentary to this verse, he notes the omission of the Ammonite's reaction. In order to explain this absence,

Nahmanides writes that Ammon and Moab are considered one nation. Thus, their reaction is included in what the Bible writes about the Moabites.

The close relationship between Ammon and Moab is noted by Nahmanides in other contexts as well. In his commentary to Num. 21:29 he writes that Jephthah mentioned Chemosh when speaking to the king of Ammon because it was worshipped by the Ammonites (Judg. 11:24), like their Moabite brethren, in addition to their god Milcom. Alternatively, Nahmanides explains that Jephthah was noting that just as the Moabite god Chemosh and Moabite king Balak were unable to help the Moabites maintain their land, (which had been conquered by Sihon, who lost it to the Israelites); so too the Ammonites had nothing that could help them regain the land that they had lost (to the Israelites, via Sihon).<sup>3</sup>

Raabad, the early Provencal scholar R. Abraham b. David (1125–1198), also discusses the brotherly relationship between the nations of Ammon and Moab. He offers an even stronger testimony to their closeness. The mid-rash *Torat Kohanim* (*Mezora*, Parsha #5) offers an exegetical derivation to teach that the laws of ritual leprosy on houses (Lev. 14:33–57) only took effect once the Israelites conquered the land of Israel proper, not when they had conquered “the land of Ammon and Moab” in Trans-Jordan. In his commentary to *Torat Kohanim*, Raabad asks when the Israelites conquered Ammonite land in Trans-Jordan, the only land they conquered there (besides Og’s) was Moabite (which had previously been conquered by Sihon), not Ammonite. After noting this question, Raabad notes the contradiction between Numbers, which states that Sihon conquered Moabite territory, not Ammonite territory; and Judges, which records that the king of Ammon demanded that Jephthah turn over the Ammonite lands which the Israelites had conquered upon their exodus from Egypt.

Raabad suggests that since the progenitors of the nations of Ammon and Moab were brothers, the two nations were so closely knit that one king reigned over both of them. He explains that it is likely that the two nations instituted a rotation whereby one king would be an Ammonite and the next would be a Moabite. In the time of Sihon, the king of both nations was a Mo-

abite. It was under his reign that Sihon conquered territory from both Ammon and Moab. This explains why Numbers only mentions that Sihon conquered Moab. Since the king over both Ammon and Moab at that time was a Moabite, the Bible records the defeat of the king of Moab. Later, in the time of Jephthah, an Ammonite reigned over both nations. He demanded the return of Ammonite and Moabite territories, which the Israelites had conquered (from Sihon).<sup>4</sup>

Based on this, Rabbi Yitzhak Sorotzkin explains why Jephthah mentioned the Moabite idol Chemosh and the Moabite king Balak. Jephthah stressed that even Balak, the Moabite king celebrated for his bravery and might (see Nahmanides to Numbers 22:4), and his god, Chemosh, were unable to save Ammonite and Moabite territory from ultimately becoming Israelite.<sup>5</sup> In doing so, Jephthah tried to get the Ammonite king to back down from his demands.

Malbim (to Judg. 11:13) also posits that in Jephthah's time the king of Ammon ruled over Moab. This explains the legitimacy to his claim to territories which had once belonged to Moab, in addition to the lands which were historically Ammonite.

Interestingly, the Bible (Deut. 23:3–4) says that one of the reasons that Ammonites and Moabites are barred from marrying Israelites is the fact that Balak, king of Moab, hired Balaam to curse the Israelites. Malbim explains that even though Balak was only the king of Moab, not Ammon, Ammon is also to be ostracized because the two nations are considered one.<sup>6</sup> In light of the above, this is especially compelling because they shared a king, and it was that king who hired Balaam.

#### THE SPREAD OF THE IDOL CHEMOSH

As mentioned above, Nahmanides suggests that the Ammonites worshipped Chemosh just as the Moabites did. An early rabbinic tradition about the nature of the Moabite idol Chemosh may help trace the history and spread of that idol (and its contemporary incarnation) and verify Nahmanides' proposal. According to this tradition, Chemosh is a black stone in the form of a

woman<sup>7</sup> to whom many different peoples pilgrimage to “greet.”<sup>8</sup> Apparently, one in a thousand of these pilgrims did not return for mysterious reasons. R. Menahem Ziyoni (1340–1410) adds that this stone has stood in place since the Six Days of Creation.<sup>9</sup>

The earliest known source for this tradition is the 11<sup>th</sup> century Midrash *Lekah Tov* (to Num. 21:29), sometimes known as *Pesikta Zutrata*, written by R. Tobiah b. Eliezer. He adds that the idol is located in the desert and its location is known in Arabic as “Mecca.” It seems that tradition identifies the Moabite idol Chemosh with the Kaaba, the Muslim shrine at Mecca.<sup>10</sup>

Both R. Tobiah and the 13<sup>th</sup> century author of *Peirush HaRokeah* (a member of the Hassidei Ashkenaz movement) write that people from “Moab and her neighbors” would come to prostrate themselves in front of Chemosh. They support this by quoting the verse in Judges in which Jephthah mentions the idol when responding to the Ammonite king (to show that worship of this idols was not confined to Moabites).<sup>11</sup> These two sources seem to stand in consonance with Nahmanides’ suggestion that the Ammonites—who are certainly considered Moab’s neighbors – also worshipped Chemosh.

Nonetheless, R. Jacob of Vienna (a 14<sup>th</sup> century Bohemian commentator),<sup>12</sup> R. Jacob Dilshkov (a 14<sup>th</sup> century German commentator),<sup>13</sup> and the Tosafist work *Paneah Raza* (to Num. 21:29), all quote the tradition concerning Chemosh and add “in the days of Sihon, only Moab worshipped it”. It seems that these sources understood that while in the times of Sihon only Moab worshipped Chemosh, it later became more popular. It seems that these commentators stressed that in the times of Sihon only the Moabites worshipped Chemosh, as opposed to a later time – say, in the days of Jephthah – by when the Ammonites also worshipped it. This understanding supports Nahmanides’ idea that the Ammonites also worshipped Chemosh.

#### CONCLUSION

The peculiarities of Judges 11 can be understood in light of the various commentaries. When Judges refers to Ammonite territory between Arnon



and Jabbok this could refer to an area that was once actually ruled by Ammon and then conquered by Sihon (according to one opinion with Moab conquering that land in between) or to a land that was really Moabite, with the Ammonite king representing Moabite interests. In the same way, we can understand Jephthah's references to the Moabite king and idol when responding to the Ammonite king by noting that in the context of this dialogue, the Ammonite were taking the place of the Moabites – with whom they are so closely associated and related. We also explored the notion that the worship of Chemosh, the Moabite idol, eventually spread to Ammon (and is perhaps preserved by contemporary Muslims in their services at the Kaaba in Mecca).

## NOTES

1. Cf. T. E. Levy (ed.), *The Archaeology of Society in the Holy Land* (London: Leicester University Press, 1995) pp. 399–411 who argues based on archeological hypotheses that the tribal kingdom of Ammon developed before that of Moab.
2. S. Freilich (ed.), *Pirush Rabbeinu Meyuhas Al Sefer Bamidbar* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1977) pg. 140.
3. To answer this question, Kimhi (as explained by the 16<sup>th</sup> century scholar R. Shmuel Laniado, E. Batzri (ed.), *Kli Yaqar Al Sefer Shoftim* (Jerusalem: HaKtav Institute, 1995) p. 268) explains that Jephthah was sarcastically telling the king of Ammon that if he wished to take that which belonged to Moab; he should also adopt Chemosh, the national idol of Moab, as his own god. Kimhi does not explain why Jephthah said that the Moabite king Balak had not warred with the Israelites. Perhaps it was in the same sarcastic vein, as if to say “Once you are following the footsteps of the Moabites, then you should at least take Balak as a role model.”
4. J. Schlossberg (ed.), *Torat Kohaim Im Pirush HaRaavad* (Vienna, 1862) pp. 72b–73a.
5. Y. Sorotzkin, *Rinat Yitzhak Al Sefer Shoftim* (Wickliffe, Ohio, 2003) pp. 330–331.
6. This is based on Raabad's assertion that Ammon and Moab shared a king. Although Nahmanides views the two nations as closely related (as mentioned above), he stops short of explaining that they shared a king. See Meiri (to TB *Yevamot* 76a) who explains that even though only Balak hired Balaam to curse the Israelites, all the Moabites are to be ostracized because a king and his nation are mutually responsible for each other's sins. Nahmanides (to Deut. 23:5) explains that only the Moabites were punished for hiring Balaam, while the Ammonites were ostracized for a different reason (i.e., because they did not supply the travelling Israelites with bread and water). According to Meiri, if Raabad is correct that Ammon and Moab shared a king, then both nations should be held equally responsible for hiring Balaam, for Balak was king over both of them. However, Nahmanides explains that the Ammonites were not held responsible for Balak hiring Balaam. This further confirms Nahmanides' rejection of Raabad's explanation that Ammon and Moab shared a king. For further discussion of the reasons for ostra-

cizing Ammon and Moab, see R. C. Klein “The Iniquities of Ammon and Moab,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* Vol. 43:3; 2015).

7. In line with the commentators who associate Chemosh with the Kaaba (see below), this likely refers to the vagina-shaped encasing in which the Kaaba is housed and/or to the idea proposed by historians that the Kaaba is a remnant of the pre-Islamic cult at Mecca which worshipped Aphrodite/Ishtar, a goddess of fertility.

8. Petrus Alfonsi (1062–1110), a Jewish apostate who converted to Christianity, writes that the two sons of Lot, Ammon and Moab, worshipped two stone idols: a black one named Mercurius and a white one named Chamos. This is similar enough to the rabbinic tradition that Chemosh was a black stone. See Dr. Bernard Septimus’ article “Petrus Alfonsi on the Cult at Mecca”, *Speculum*, Vol. 56:3 (Jul. 1981) pp. 517–533.

9. *Sefer Ziviyoni* (Lemberg, 1882) pg. 65a.

10. J. Qafih (ed.), *Pirush Neviim Rishonim L'Rabbeinu Avraham ben Shlomo, I Melachim* (Kiryat Ono: Machon Mishnat HaRambam, 2006) pg. 240. Interestingly, the 14<sup>th</sup> century Yemenite scholar R. Abraham b. Solomon writes in the name of R. Isaac the Spaniard that Chemosh is similar to the Kaaba in Mecca because it is a large idol, but only its head is visible. He also explains that the name *Chemosh* is related to the Hebrew word *Kh'mosh*, which refers to something “withered” and “contracted”, and probably alluded to what the Moabites wished upon their enemies.

11. J. Klugmann (ed.), *Pirush ha-Rokeah Al HaTorah, Bamidbar* (Bene Barak, 2009) pg. 85.

12. M. Grossberg (ed.), *Peshatim u-Pirushim* (Mainz, 1888) pp. 175–176.

13. *Imrei Noam* (Istanbul, 1540) pg. 33b.