

# Places Hidden in the Old Testament

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The Old Testament contains some 8,500 proper names, of which several thousand are place names. The overwhelming majority of these place names have been identified as place names and have been translated as such.

In this article I hope to look at two examples where the traditional Hebrew text of the Old Testament may conceal a hidden place name, and briefly comment on an example of the process in reverse.

The text of the Hebrew Bible was originally written with the consonants only. It is this form of the text that we meet in the Dead Sea Scrolls for example. In the fifth and sixth centuries AD a group of Jewish scholars became alarmed at the diminishing use and understanding of Hebrew so they added a series of vowel points under the consonants, so as not to break up the consonantal text, which they regarded as sacred. These scholars were called Masoretes and the text they produced “Masoretic” from the Hebrew word “*masorah*” meaning “tradition”. It is this “Masoretic text” that is used to translate the Old Testament.

As the Masoretes added the vowel points to preserve the pronunciation they were inevitably forced to make judgements as to how the text should be interpreted. When they came across consonants corresponding to well-known words it was inevitable that they should try to make sense of these consonants as a representation of that well-known word, but the word in fact may have been a proper name, the significance of which had already been lost.

A couple of examples illustrate the point:

**1) Numbers 22:4b-5a** The Moabite King Balak summons the false-prophet Balaam.

*“So Balak son of Zippor, who was king of Moab at that time, sent messengers to summon Balaam son of Beor, who was at Pethor, near the River, in his native land.” (NIV)*

The phrase translated “in his native land” is ‘*eres b<sup>e</sup>ne ‘ammo* in Hebrew, “land of the sons of his people”. That Balaam should be summoned from his native land is far from remarkable, furthermore, the phrase occurs without any preposition, the “in” of the *NIV* is an addition. This should provoke us to seek an alternative.

The River in question was the Euphrates. We know from the statue (now in the British Museum) of King Idrimi

(1480-1450 BC) of the Syrian city state of Alalakh, of the existence of an area named Amaw. Idrimi states that he ruled over “Mukishhi, Ni’ and Amaw” (Smith 1946:14-16 lines 23 & 37). The latter being the region of the Sajûr valley between Aleppo and Carchemish on the Euphrates and should not be confused with Amaw in Egyptian texts which is a gold bearing region in north eastern Sudan (Albright 1950:16 n.13). Since the daghesh, the dot that doubles the *m*, and the vowel *o* are the Masoretic attempt at pronunciation, the Hebrew ‘*ammo* could easily be revocalised ‘*Amaw*. This interpretation is adopted by *RSV*, *NRSV*, *ERV*, *NEB*, *REB*, *JB*, *NJB*, *GNB*, and *Français Courant*.

So it seems better to read “*He sent messengers to Balaam son of Beor at Pethor, which is on the Euphrates, in the land of Amaw, to summon him.*” as *NRSV*.

**2) 2 Kings 19:13 parallel Isaiah 37:13.** Messengers of Sennacherib King of Assyria (705-681 BC) try to persuade Hezekiah King of Judah to surrender.

*“Where is the king of Hamath, the king of Arpad, the king of the city of Sepharvaim, or of Hena or Ivvah?” (NIV)*

It is odd that Sepharvaim is singled out for city status. In fact the Masoretes seemed to doubt this as they vocalised the word as *la’îr*. The so-called construct “city of” form would be *l’îr*. Their pointing indicates that they understood it as a city name. *Lair* actually corresponds to a city known as *Lahiru* in Assyrian texts and *l’r* in the correspondence of Arsames the Persian satrap of Egypt in the late fifth century BC. This town is in the foothills of the Zagros mountains (Driver 1954:21a) and would fit well with the other towns mentioned in the verse which were conquered by the Assyrians.

This rendering is followed by the *Jewish Publication Society’s Tanak* which reads:

*“Where is the king of Hamath? And the king of Arpad? And the kings of Lair, Sepharvaim, Hena, and Ivvah?”. So also REB, NJB, Français Courant.*

Having looked at a couple of examples of words pointed as nouns hiding place names, we should also note that the

converse is also observable in the Old Testament, namely a word now understood as a place name could represent an ordinary noun.

Ezekiel 27 describes Tyre's trading partners in 586 BC (See Ezekiel 26:1).

The Masoretic text of Ezekiel 27:19a reads *w<sup>e</sup>dan w<sup>e</sup>yawan m<sup>e</sup>'úzzal*, which the *NIV* translates as "Danites and Greeks from Uzal". A slight change of the vocalisation to "*w<sup>e</sup>dane yayin me'úzal*" reads "and vats of wine from Uzal" (Millard, 1962, 201-3). Uzal corresponds to an area known in Assyrian texts as Izalla, the wine producing Tur Abdin area south of the Turkish town of Mardin. The wine of that area was renowned in the Ancient World. For example the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar (605-562 BC) received wine from that area (Millard 1980:1615a).

In conclusion, it is important that we see the question in perspective. The above examples are the *only* ones I have gleaned from a careful reading of the Hebrew Old Testament, these are the interesting exceptions that prove

the rule, namely that the Masoretic text is a reliable text to use in translating even the smallest details of the Hebrew Old Testament.

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### References

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