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VIEW #7
THE DESCENDER

Christophe Girot

The crossing of the Jordan River is something that has recurred throughout history as a symbolic act of faith. Whether sacred or profane, over a bridge or by fording at a watering spot, it defines a line of convergence and point of passage between two worlds. This is how Joshua led his people into the Promised Land, crossing westward on dry ground.¹ The same can be said of Elijah who, persecuted by King Ahab, fled eastward. He struck the river with his cloak and the waters parted, allowing him and Elisha to come to safety on the other side.² As straightforward as river crossing may seem, it has become more difficult—not to say unlikely—in recent times. This is not, however, due to the river's rumbling waters; the new border between Israel and the Kingdom of Jordan consists of a dry riverbed entangled in shrubs, barbed wire, and landmines. The chronic absence of water (reduced now to a mere trickle) is symptomatic of a greater problem afflicting the entire region: The Jordan's black basalt riverbed lies bare under the scorching sun. It is the bearer of an invisible chasm, a bloody, deep, and contemptuous wound. Bedouins, shepherds, and travelers who used to cross the liminal waters of the Jordan are now summoned to remain on one side as though the realm of the river had suddenly collapsed into two separate halves which turn their backs on each other, barring any possible passage. At Gesher, three bridges have been closed and with this the secular rite of passage that once united the two banks has come to an end. The only choice left is to move either up or down the border. But did any prophet ever show his people the way down to the Dead Sea? Descending the holy Jordan River today, one runs like a cursor between two parallel worlds in which people speak their respective language and pray in their own way to the same god. Mutual affinity has turned to latent enmity, and so the river has been sealed down its spine, leaving the traveler no choice but to embark on a lopsided descent toward the Dead Sea and its tentative shores.

The Jordan River received its name from the old Hebrew word *Yarden*, signifying the descender.³ *Yarden* is derived from the verb *yarad*,

1 The Holy Bible: New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1994), Joshua 3.1–4.24.

2 Kings 2.14.

3 Ernest Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language for Readers of English* (Jerusalem: Carta, The University of Haifa and The Beatrice & Arthur Minden Foundation, 1987), 26.

which expresses the notion of descent and decline or something reaching deep down. In Jewish culture, death is understood as the descent into Sheol, so the Jordan River leads us unsurprisingly down to the Dead Sea, the lowest elevation on land worldwide.⁴ In Islam it is believed to be the site of God's punishment and the final receptacle for all human sin. Seemingly condemned today, the Jordan River has been reduced to a trickle and the sea's entire shoreline is giving in, its sediment turning to pure powder. With a current surface elevation of 430 meters below sea level, this sea is continuing to sink at a rate of one meter per year. This rapid evaporation has brought about more than 7,000 sinkholes in the last twenty years:⁵ Lobes of ground are collapsing into moon-like craters, swallowing up entire buildings and roads.⁶ The lowest place on earth is no longer as hard or as stable as might be expected. Many resorts around the Dead Sea, such as the emblematic Ein Gedi, have had to close due to rapidly receding shorelines. It is difficult to imagine what change is yet to come as the shores keep on sinking and collapsing all around.

Early scientific observations about the Dead Sea's position below sea level came from a study by naval captain William Francis Lynch, who had led a US expedition down to its shores in April of 1848.⁷ His team descended the rushing waters of the Jordan River from the Sea of Galilee on three skiffs. Lynch carefully triangulated the territory along the course of the river, returning with some cartographic information of the depression. This geographic fact was previously unbeknown to the prophets, though it may have been felt in the unease caused by the heady weight of its high atmospheric pressure, or the hypersaline, lifeless waters of the sea upon which human bodies floated awkwardly. Certainly, a general feeling of strangeness and finitude has pervaded the Dead Sea region since time immemorial.

⁴ Emil G. Hirsch, entry for "Sheol" in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. 11, ed. Isidore Singer (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1905), 282.

⁵ Meir Abelson et al, "Evolution of the Dead Sea Sinkholes," in *New Frontiers in Dead Sea Paleoenvironmental Research: Geological Society of America, Special Paper 401*, eds. Yehouda Enzel, Amotz Agnon, and Mordechai Stein, 1–15. DOI: 10.1130/2006.2401(16), accessed April 17, 2018: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/266462319_Evolution_of_the_Dead_Sea_sinkholes.

tion/266462319_Evolution_of_the_Dead_Sea_sinkholes.

⁶ Tanya Lewis, "Why Dangerous Sinkholes Keep Appearing Along the Dead Sea," *Live Science* (April 6, 2015), accessed on February 26, 2018: <https://www.livescience.com/50379-dead-sea-sinkholes.html>.

⁷ David Howard Bain, *Bitter Waters: America's Forgotten Naval Mission to the Dead Sea* (New York: Overlook Press, 2011).

The Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven; And he overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground.⁸

The cities of Sodom or Gomorrah, thought to have been located on the southern shores of the Dead Sea, perished tragically under the fires of heaven. The biblical reason for this fate was the inhabitants' impenitent attitude and the unforgiveable fault they committed, punishable only by eternal damnation. But science tells us a different story about the "fault." Indeed, an understanding of geology makes the tragic event that afflicted Sodom and Gomorrah more plausible, albeit for tectonic reasons rather than the wrath of God. Archaeologists have found the remains of two towns located on the eastern fault of the Great Rift Valley, a 6,000-kilometer sequence of landscapes formed by the meeting of continental plates that stretches from the Beqaa Valley in Lebanon to Mozambique in Southeast Africa.⁹ The apocalyptic destruction was, in fact, caused by an extremely violent earthquake that occurred in 2070 BC which caused the ground along the fault to be uplifted several meters.¹⁰ But how does this explain the biblical "brimstone and fire" that fell upon the inhabitants? Evidence shows that the earthquake, located on the fault at the exact point where two continental plates meet, exerted such a great force on the earth's crust that it released immense quantities of bituminous material and gases under pressure.¹¹ Highly inflammable tar was hurled into the air and instantly ignited upon contact with the settlement's hearths, thus leaving all but a handful of the inhabitants to perish in the flames. Among the survivors was Lot, who escaped to a cave near Zoar along with his

⁸ Genesis 19:24–25.

⁹ Bryant Wood, "The Discovery of the Sin Cities of Sodom and Gomorrah," *Bible and Spade*, vol. 12, no. 3 (Summer 1999), 67–80.

¹⁰ Jack Donahue, "Hydrologic and Topographic Change During and After Early Bronze Age Occupation at Bab edh-Dhra' and Numeira," in *Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan I*, ed. Adnan Hadidi (Amman, Jordan: Department of Antiquities, 1985), 131–140.

¹¹ Frederick Clapp, "Geology and Bitumens of the Dead Sea Area, Palestine and Transjordan," in *Bulletin of Petroleum Geologists*, vol. 20, iss. 7 (July 1936), 881–990; Frederick Clapp, "The Site of Sodom and Gomorrah: Diversity of Views," *American Journal of Archaeology*, vol. 40, No. 3 (1936), 323–344. DOI:10.2307/498693.

two daughters.¹² Lot's wife was less lucky. It is said that no sooner had she turned around to look back at the destruction than she was turned into a pillar of salt.¹³ She bears no name in the Bible. Lot later joined his uncle Abraham on the slopes of Mount Hebron, from where the latter had witnessed the event, seeing black smoke rise from the plain. Archaeologists speak of a layer of bitumen and ashes forty centimeters thick under which the ruins of both cities were buried.¹⁴ All this took place on a harvest day in early summer when the ripe grapes had just been picked in the scorching heat of the desert—a cluster of them found under a thick crust of ashes almost perfectly preserved, with their skins still on.¹⁵

When John the Baptist blessed the waters of the Jordan, the entire river became a holy body. He promoted unity amongst people regardless of race and creed. The man was infinitely gentle and close not only to the river, but to all animals and plants. Considered a saint by Christians, he is also recognized as an important prophet in Islam, where he is known as Nabi Yahya. Although baptism is not practiced in the Muslim faith, Yahya's word on the powers of the Jordan River to wash away all sins as it descends into the Dead Sea was praised. He was also revered in Sufism for his chastity and kindness, and his acceptance of all those who sought solace by the river. An early mosaic from the cupola of the Arian Baptistry in Ravenna depicts Jesus, entirely naked and wading into the Jordan waist high, flanked by John the Baptist who is standing on land cloaked in a leopard skin, resting his right hand on Jesus's head. On the left side of the mosaic, to symbolize the Jordan, an old man crowned with crab claws and holding a sprig of willow spills an urn full of water as the Holy Ghost descends from heaven in the form of a dove dispersing lustral waters. Jesus came to John the Baptist seeking refuge from Jerusalem by crossing the holy Jordan eastward to his cove on the river in Bethabara.¹⁶ The head of Saint John the Baptist now rests in a shrine at the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. The fact that he

¹² Genesis 19.18–22.

¹³ Genesis 19.24–26.

¹⁴ M.D. Coogan, "Numeira 1981," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 225 (Summer 1984), 75–81.

¹⁵ Coogan, "Numeira 1981," 75–81.

¹⁶ This location corresponds with the location of the holy monastery of St. John the Baptist on the Jordan River east of Jericho.

was beheaded by order of King Herod, just to satisfy the whims of a lascivious Salomé, turned him into a true martyr.

Around the world, cultures confer deep religious significance upon their local rivers. The Vedic culture centered in Punjab, for instance, recognizes the Ganges River as the seat of Shakti the “descender.” This is where the restless energy of divine knowledge flows in an eternal cycle between heaven and hell in order to liberate all embodied souls and rid the earth of its impurities. Water in this instance is understood as a divine energy in motion that can be tasted, felt, and absorbed. The Jordan River, as small and insignificant as it may seem in comparison to the mighty Ganges, can be understood as the “descender” of Judeo-Christian and Muslim civilizations. Flowing from the heavens on Mount Hermon in Lebanon through the Hula Valley to the bountiful Sea of Galilee and the legendary gardens of Canaan, it eventually reaches the netherworld of the Dead Sea far below. Today, however, the dried-up region is plagued by another sort of conundrum, an existential one: Divinity in a river is something immediate and everlasting—that is, as long as it flows, it survives. Hindus believe that we have entered a final era of darkness during which their sacred river will dry up. If a river happens to dry up, the cycle is broken and the sacred river ceases to exist as such. How can a river stripped of its waters still exist or even continue to bare its name? As the shores of the Dead Sea turn to dust, the descender’s role begins to fade. Let us hope for a time when the Jordan River is not merely remembered in liturgy but rather readily flowing, when people will cross its liminal waters again.