

The Sinai Peninsula

9. The river of Egypt

David Green

THERE HAS BEEN much discussion by Bible commentators as to whether “the river [*nahal*] of Egypt” mentioned several times in Scripture refers to the Wadi el-‘Arish in northern Sinai or to one of the branches of the Nile, such as the Pelusiac branch that marked the eastern border of Egypt. In this concluding article of the series we consider this question.

The meaning of the term

All seven occurrences of the phrase ‘the *nahal* of Egypt’ in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament are listed in Table 1, together with the translations given by a number of different versions. Two passages in Ezekiel that presumably refer to the same *nahal* are also included.

There are three main Hebrew words translated ‘river’ by the AV. These are set out in Table 2 together with their meanings.¹ Some words of

Table 2

<i>Yeor</i>	A river or stream which forms a definite channel through the land, usually referring to the Nile and/or its canals. Probably an Egyptian loan word, being similar to the Egyptian word for the Nile.
<i>Nahar</i>	River or stream. A permanent watercourse. Often used to refer to the major rivers of Bible lands. In the Psalms it is used more generally for torrents of water.
<i>Nahal</i>	Wadi, torrent or torrent valley. Usually refers to a dry riverbed or ravine, which in the rainy season becomes a raging torrent.

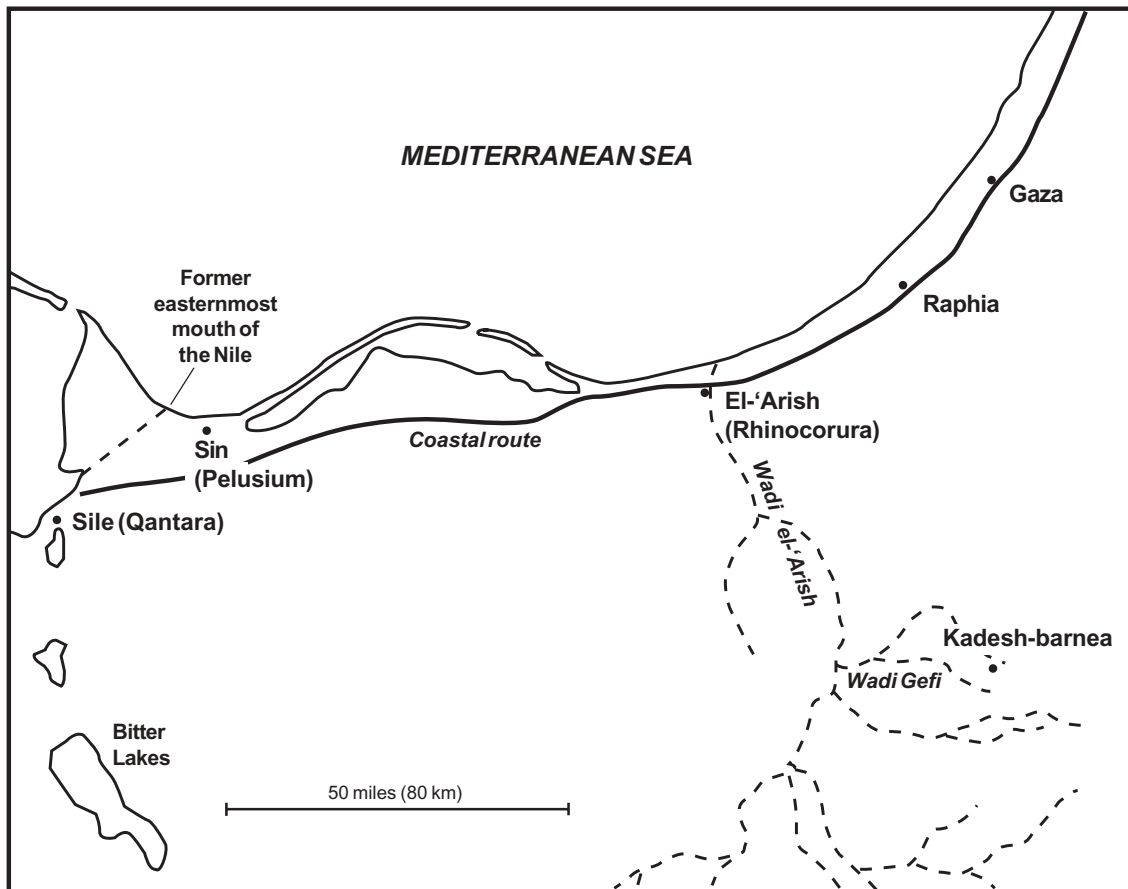
Table 1

The <i>nahal</i> of Egypt	Numbers 34:5; Joshua 15:4,47; 1 Kings 8:65; 2 Kings 24:7; 2 Chronicles 7:8; Isaiah 27:12
AV	“The river of Egypt” except Isaiah 27:12, “the stream of Egypt”
NKJV	“The Brook of Egypt”
NIV	“The Wadi of Egypt”
Septuagint	“The river of Egypt” except Joshua 15:4, “the valley of Egypt”, and Isaiah 27:12, “Rhinocorura”
Connecting references	Ezekiel 47:19; 48:28; “the river”; the words “of Egypt”, lacking in the Hebrew text, are supplied in the NIV

Job explain the meaning of *nahal* nicely: “My brothers have dealt deceitfully like a brook [*nahal*], like the streams [*aphiq*] of the brooks [*nahalim*] that pass away . . . When it is warm, they cease to flow; when it is hot, they vanish from their place” (6:15,17, NKJV).

However, sometimes the word *nahal* does refer to a permanent flow of water, as for example the stream that issues from the temple in the millennial age. In Ezekiel 47 the word *nahal* is used eight times of these waters that flow down and heal the Dead Sea (vv. 5-12), waters described by Zechariah as flowing in summer and winter (14:8). Other examples where *nahal* means a permanent stream are Leviticus 11:9, which refers to *nahalim* that have fish, and 1 Kings 18:40. In the latter case the long drought had probably

1. Taken from p. 570, Vol. 2, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Harris, Archer & Waltke, Moody Press, 1980.



reduced the flow of the River Kishon to a very low level, making it more like a stream in a wadi.

Perhaps the meaning of *nahal* concentrates more on the valley carved out by a stream or torrent than the stream itself. *Young's Concordance* defines it as "a dividing brook in a valley" and *Strong's Concordance* as a stream, especially a winter torrent and by implication a (narrow) valley. These definitions of *nahal* should be compared with those given in [Table 2](#). The Hebrew word *nahal* seems to correspond closely with the Arabic *wadi*, which is defined as "a hollow between hills whether dry or moist", and is said to be derived from *wada*, where the fundamental idea is to perforate with water.² The same writer suggests that *nahal* may be similarly derived from *chalal*, to perforate.

What is 'the *nahal* of Egypt'?

The majority of commentators identify 'the *nahal* of Egypt' with the Wadi el-'Arish (see map), which meets the Mediterranean about 145 kilo-

metres (about ninety miles) east of the Suez Canal and eighty kilometres (about fifty miles) west of Gaza, rather than with the easternmost of the Nile's ancient branches (the Pelusiac). This identification is based on the following reasons:³

- 1 There is little evidence of any Israelite activity associated with the Nile. The only example of such activity that I have come across is in the claim by Pharaoh Shishak that some of his border guards had been killed by Israelites near the Bitter Lakes that now lie on the line of the Suez Canal. He used this as his excuse for invading Judah and Israel in the days of Rehoboam (1 Kgs. 14:25).
- 2 In the Bible the word *nahal* is never used of the Nile, but fits much better as referring to a 'wadi-torrent'.

2. p. 14, *Sinai and Palestine*, A. P. Stanley, Murray, fifth edition, 1858.

3. These reasons are based mainly on those presented by K. A. Kitchen on pages 302-3 of *The New Bible Dictionary*, IVP, third edition, 1996.

- 3 The Assyrian King Sargon controlled as far as the 'nahal musur' (*musur* is Assyrian for Egypt), where he appointed a governor in the city and arranged for trading to take place between the Egyptians and the Assyrians. Over a century later Nebuchadnezzar took control of all the land from the Euphrates as far south as "the river [*nahal*] of Egypt" so that the king of Egypt came no more "out of his land" (2 Kgs. 24:7). If the *nahal* mentioned in both of these situations was the eastern branch of the Nile it would be expected that the Egyptians would feel so threatened that they would react militarily. However, foreign garrisons at the Wadi el-'Arish would be bearable to the Egyptians at times of military weakness, in view of the ninety miles or so of desert between these garrisons and the border of Egypt proper.
- 4 Joshua 15:47 gives "the river of Egypt" as the southern limit of towns and villages (settlements and villages, NIV) associated with the city of Gaza. This fits in well with the fact that the Wadi el-'Arish separates the arable land and meadows on the coastal plain to the north from what was a barren desert (with slight scrub) area to the south. On this basis the Wadi el-'Arish near the coast is a very practical boundary, which includes usable land and excludes the real desert.
- 5 Numbers 34:5 and Joshua 15:4 represent the 'nahal of Egypt' as being part of the southern border of the land of Canaan and of the territory of Judah. This border also is said to run south to Kadesh-barnea and to the Dead Sea (Num. 34:3,4; Josh. 15:2,3). No part of the Nile or its easternmost branch fits these parameters, but the Wadi el-'Arish does. In fact Wadi Gefi, one of its tributary wadis on the northern side, actually reaches to the vicinity of Kadesh-barnea.

Shihor

There are four references to Shihor (Sihor) in the Bible. Two of these clearly refer to the Nile. Isaiah 23:3 equates "the grain of Shihor" with "the harvest of the River [*Yeor*, the Nile⁴]" (NKJV), and in Jeremiah 2:18 "the waters of Sihor" are to Egypt what "the river" is to Assyria.

However, commentators differ in opinion concerning the other two, which are as follows:

"This is the land that yet remains [to be possessed]: all the territory of the Philistines . . . from Shihor, which is east of Egypt [before

Egypt, AV], as far as the border of Ekron . . ." (Josh. 13:2,3, NKJV);

"So David gathered all Israel together, from Shihor in Egypt [of Egypt, AV] to as far as the entrance of Hamath, to bring the ark of God from Kirjath Jearim" (1 Chron. 13:5, NKJV).

Some believe that these two passages should be understood in the light of Joshua 15:47 and Numbers 34:5 (see above), and that the Wadi el-'Arish is intended.⁵ If this is the correct viewpoint, we must conclude that there are two Shihor rivers. Alternatively, the Shihor of these two verses may be referring to the land between the Wadi el-'Arish and the Shihor river, as discussed in the next paragraph. The Septuagint Version seems to support this suggestion, paraphrasing Shihor as "the wilderness before Egypt" in Joshua 13:3 and as "the borders of Egypt" in 1 Chronicles 13:5.

The other view identifies Shihor with the lower reaches of the easternmost branch of the Nile in ancient times (the Pelusiac), which entered the Mediterranean Sea just west of Pelusium, the 'Sin' of Ezekiel 30:15,16. K. A. Kitchen in the *New Bible Dictionary* favours the latter identification, and considers that the second pair of references indicate the uttermost southwest limit of Israelite activity, as opposed to the practical boundary presented by the Wadi el-'Arish. However, assuming that to be the case, Joshua 13:2,3 would appear to imply that the territory of the Philistines reached all the way southwest to the border of Egypt proper.

Modern studies suggest that the name Sihor is of Egyptian origin, meaning 'waters of Horus', and Egyptian references speak of Sihor as being the river that produced rushes and salt for the delta capital Tanis (Zoan). Earlier commentators assumed that the name was of Hebrew origin and have suggested meanings such as 'dark', 'turbid', 'muddy' and 'black', based on the colour of the Nile water laden with silt.

Concluding lessons

By its very nature this study has been factual rather than exhortational, something for the head rather than for the heart. Yet frequently spiritual

-
4. Compare the translation of *yeor* in Amos 8:8 and 9:5 in the NKJV. The AV has 'flood' instead of 'river'.
5. See, for example: *Strong's Concordance*; *Young's Concordance*; *Grollenburg's Atlas of the Bible*, Nelson, 1963.

lessons can be based on things relating to the physical world.

Our life in this age is a journey through a spiritual wilderness while we set our vision ahead, looking for “the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (Heb. 11:10, NKJV; *cf.* 13:14).

The scorching rays of the sun that we experience in this spiritual desert are the tribulations and difficulties that test our faith and help us to develop characters pleasing to our heavenly Father (Mt. 13:5,6,20,21; Lk. 8:13). If we fail to tap into the water of life that is provided we will be spiritually unfruitful. That water is available daily in the form of the Word of God, and we neglect it at our peril. If we do tap into that water of life we can grow into upright trees of righteousness that produce much fruit to the glory of our heavenly Father.

In addition, there are oases provided where we can find spiritual food, shade and rest after a hard week of travel. There we are able to meet other pilgrims heading for the same city and have the opportunity to encourage one another to continue our journey with determination. Let us not neglect to meet together weekly to remember our absent Lord.

Likewise there are great rocks along the way where we may find shade from the heat of the sun, and springs of water welling up to the surface where we may rest awhile to be refreshed. So it is on the spiritual level that we can benefit from attending Bible classes and other ecclesial meetings, as well as being a help to others who are travelling with us.

However, our journey through the wilderness does have its perils, particularly if we do not keep up with our brethren and sisters but allow ourselves to become spiritual stragglers. The spiritual counterpart of Amalek is the power of sin that lies in wait to trap the unwary traveller and at the same time seeks to steal away the water of life by replacing the Word of God with the wisdom of this world. Our heavenly Father has war on sin “from generation to generation” and will “utterly put out the remembrance of Amalek [sin] from under heaven” (Ex. 17:16,14).

“A man shall be as an hiding place from the wind, and a covert [shelter] from the tempest; as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land” (Isa. 32:2). So the Lord Jesus is to us as we journey towards the Kingdom of God.

(Concluded)

The alphabets of the Bible: Greek

John Carder

SOME HISTORIANS and archaeologists theorise that the Phoenicians or the Canaanites invented the Semitic alphabet and taught it first to the Hebrews and then spread it to the Greeks. But there is no evidence that the Canaanites had an alphabetic script or that the Phoenicians developed a literature. No scrolls or books have survived in mainland Phoenicia or in its empire, which stretched to Carthage and beyond. There are some Phoenician commercial records, lists of goods and cargoes, and a very few inscriptions on royal tombs of a late date.

I believe that alphabetical writing was developed for recording the Scriptures, and that the Phoenicians borrowed the Hebrew alphabet mainly for their trading purposes and spread it around the ports of the Mediterranean. Many of the people they traded with were Greek. The Hebrews were not great sailors in the early days,

and Phoenicians are mentioned in the records of Solomon’s overseas ventures.

The earliest Greek records known to us are also lists of goods and cargoes and of palace treasures. They were in a variety of scripts, some still not fully deciphered. The Greek alphabet still in use today was adopted in Attica, with its capital Athens, when that city-state became dominant. This was at the beginning of the ‘Classical’ period, when many still-famous dramatists and philosophers flourished. The start of that period roughly coincided with the return of the Jews from exile, that is, about 500 B.C.

Hebrew and Greek

The very word ‘alphabet’ is Greek, but betrays its connection with Hebrew, comprising the first two letters in both languages. Indeed, the first four letters in each language show the connection: