

“They came to the pits, and found no water” (Jer. 14:3)

Tony Benson

A LOOK AT A concordance will show that there are no fewer than twelve Hebrew words translated ‘pit’ in the Old Testament, including the well-known *sheol*, referring of course to the grave. One of these words is *geb*, which occurs only twice, both in the plural (*gebim*), once translated ‘pits’ and once ‘ditches’. Young gives the meaning as ‘ditch’, ‘marshy place’, and Strong as ‘well’, ‘cistern’ or ‘ditch’.

According to Professor Menashe Har-El, a life-long student of the geography of Israel, in his book *Landscape, Nature and Man in the Bible*, this word is used in a rather specialised way. The Judean Desert, situated between the central mountain range of Israel and the Dead Sea, has many seasonal streams, known to us by the Arab word ‘wadi’. They flow only after the occasional rain storms of the winter months. The beds of these wadis have waterholes, places where the water remains after the stream has ceased to flow. These, says Professor Har-El, are the *gebim*. The waterholes have two main causes: firstly erosion in the softer places of the wadi bed, and secondly when erosion of the banks causes large boulders to roll down into the wadi, damming the flow for a time.

These *gebim* are valuable sources of water in the Judean Desert since they retain water long after the flow of water has ceased. Even when there is no surface water, there is still plenty of water under the surface. Shepherds with their flocks know where to find the *gebim*, and even if no water is visible know that if they dig down they will come across it.

What then of the two passages where the word occurs? The opening verses of Jeremiah 14 concern a severe drought that is afflicting Judah, a punishment from God for their idolatry, in accordance with Deuteronomy 11:16,17. The verse from which our title is taken reads: “And their nobles have sent their little ones to the waters: they came to the pits [*gebim*], and found no water; they returned with their vessels empty”. Even the last resort in time of drought, the *gebim* in the wadi beds, had no water.



Picture: Tony Benson

Pools in the bed of the Wadi Zin.

The second reference is in 2 Kings 3. This chapter concerns a joint military expedition by Israel, Judah and Edom against Moab. The expedition was suffering shortage of water, and we read that the prophet Elisha, who accompanied the expedition, said, “Thus said the LORD: This wadi shall be full of pools [*gebim*]. For thus said the LORD: You shall see no wind, you shall see no rain, and yet the wadi shall be filled with water; and you and your cattle and your pack animals shall drink” (vv. 16,17, Tanakh). Not only did this provide for the needs of the army, but also, according to verses 22 and 23, the Moabites were deceived by the morning sun on the water into thinking that it was the blood of their opponents, shed in overnight strife between the different elements of the opposing forces.

What seems to have happened in this incident is that the water miraculously provided in the early morning flooded into the wadi and filled the waterholes. How we do not know. A heavy rainstorm miles away could have been sent by God to flood the valley, but if this was the case then one would have thought that the water would still be flowing, rather than settled into pools. We must be content to know that it was a miracle by the God Who can do all things, but it is helpful to have light shone on the incident by one with an intimate knowledge of and love for God’s land.