

IDENTIFICATION OF TALMUDIC PLACE NAMES

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1. BETH-GERES בֵּית־גֵּרֶס Gerasa

IN A conversation between Sages in the Talmud in the third century about the Garden of Eden, Resh Lakish said: "If it is in the Land of Israel — its gate is Beth-Shean. If it is in Arabia — its gate is Beth-Gerem . . ."¹

Several identifications were suggested for the name Beth-Gerem, as found in the printed Talmud. However, if we inspect the Munich MS of the Talmud, we see that this name can be read as Beth-Geres. Thus we have before us the Arabic Jarash and the Roman Gerasa, an important city in Transjordan. Gerasa was known for its splendid buildings, its fertile land abundant with water, and thus is rightfully compared to the entrance to the Garden of Eden.

The Jewish remains and the interesting relics of the synagogue of the first-third century which were discovered in Gerasa, prove that a great Jewish community existed in the Roman city.

Gerasa is located in Gilead, the central part of Transjordan, which was a part of the Provincia Arabia of the Romans. This is the Arabia occasionally referred to in talmudic literature.²

Beth-Geres, in the version Geres, is mentioned also in a fragment of an old Midrash found in the Cairo Genizah, describing the refuge town in Israel: "Ramoth Gilead —

¹ Erub. 19a.

² Ber. Rabba 90, 6. Y. Kil. I. Ket. X, Tan. II.

this means Geres . . . has before it two pools of water.”³ It refers to the pools which still exist in the ruins of Gerasa and are called in Arabic: al-Birkatein — the two pools.⁴

The name Beth-Geres — Geres, recalls the biblical names: Beth-Nimrah — Nimrah; Beth Azmoth — Azmoth; Beth-Gilgal — Gilgal; Beth-Lebaoth — Lebaoth, etc. These two forms of the same name are also found in talmudic literature: Beth-Haifa — Haifa, Beth-Meron — Meron, Beth Ma'on — Ma'on, etc. Apparently the word Beth was prefixed to the name Geres under the influence of Beth-Shean mentioned before.

2. MAZGAH מִזְגָּה Muzekka

In the vicinity of Tiberias a place named Mazgah is mentioned. Resh Lakish says: “I am familiar with Mazgah and there are only two dwellings there.”⁵ Prof. S. Klein identified Mazgah with Mes-ha, but this place is far from Tiberias, nor are the names very similar.

I believe the location of Mazgah is at the ruin called today in Arabic: Khirbat el-Muzekka.⁶ It is found near Tiberias, on the slope of the Valley of Doves (Wadi Hammam), not far from the new settlements of Arbel and Kefar-Hittim.

The Palestine Exploration Survey thus describes this site, in 1875: “Small heaps of dressed stones of medium size, a cave and spring in rock-cut well. A trough is also cut in the rock near the well.”⁷

³ L. Ginzberg, *Genizah Studies* I, p. 112; Midrash Shemuel 24, 6.

⁴ C. H. Kraeling, *Gerasa*, 1938, p. 161.

⁵ Ber. Rabba 34, 7.

⁶ *Sefer ha-Yeshub* I, 1939, p. 104.

⁷ *SWP* I, 1881, p. 404.

3. TORTAH תּוֹרְתָהּ Thorah

Some Sages have names of their native villages, such names being preceded by the word Ben or Bar — Son.⁸ Several Sages named after their native village Tortah are mentioned in talmudic literature.

Rabbi Yohanan ben Tortah is well-known for the remark he made to Rabbi Akiba, "The grass will grow upon thy cheeks and still the son of David will not come." However, legend says that Rabbi Yohanan was named after the cow (in Aramaic: Tortah) which he sold to a Gentile and which refused to plow the field on Sabbath.⁹ This explanation is simply folk etymology.

Another Sage who came from Tortah was Hanina Tortiyah.¹⁰ The commentary *Penei Moshe* (Margalith) in the eighteenth century, says that Tortiyah is the name of the place. It may be that Rabbi Yossi Ha-Torti was also named for Tortah.¹¹

Prof. Klein says that Tortah is a place in Galilee unknown today. I believe that the place is known. In the Valley of Jezreel on the border of Lower Galilee, and within the boundary of Beth-She'arim between the new settlements of Kefar-Yehoshu'a and Yokne'am there is a small artificial mound called in Arabic: Tel Thorah. The potsherds found

⁸ Yusti bar Shunem (Y. Maas. Sheni V, 1). Shunem is a well known biblical town in the Valley of Yzr'ael. Hananiah bar 'Akbari (Y. Terum. XI, 7). 'Akbara is a village near Zephat. Hiya bar Zarnuki (B. Sanh. 26a). Zarnuka was a village near Yabneh, called in Arabic by that name. Today it is a Jewish settlement close to Rehobot. Ya'akob bar Kurshi (Y. Shab. X, 5; B. Hor. 13b), Kurshi was a village on the eastern shore of the Sea Kinneret, today the Arab village Kursi. Benjamin bar 'Ashtor (Y. Bik. I, 4) called after 'Ashtaroth, a well known biblical city, today Tel 'Ashtara in Syria.

⁹ Y. Tan. IV, 5; *Pesikta Rabbati*, p. 57a.

¹⁰ Ber. III, 5 and the commentary. Pea III, 7. Ter. VIII, 8. B. Ned. 57b, 59b. Y. Ter. X, 6. Men. 48.

¹¹ Ber. Rabba 34, 10.

on the hill indicate that it was inhabited in the time of the Romans.

A city called by a similar name, Bei-Torta, was in Babel, near Pumbedita.^{11a}

4. NASHANAH נַשְׁחָנָה Salhanah

Legend tells that when Hadrian Caesar came before Rabbi Yoshua, son of Hanina, and asked him for pepper, the Rabbi brought him "pepper from Nashana."¹²

I believe this place is the small Arab village of Salhanah, an easy corruption of Nashanah (Sanhanah — Salhanah). Salhanah, situated today beyond the Israeli border in the State of Lebanon, is built on ruins of buildings, fragments of pillars, and wells hewn of stone, which testify to an ancient settlement from the days of Roman rule over Palestine. Victor Guérin, about 1863, described its ruins and said that they "attest that here once stood a village of some importance."¹³

5. GOBLANAH (GOVLANAH) גּוֹבְלָנָה Jelebineh

A place named Goblanah or Govlanah¹⁴ is mentioned in the Talmud (the letters B and V occasionally interchange in place-names as well: Mikbar — Mikvar; Yabnit — Yavnit; Habriyah — Havriyah, etc.).

Rabbi Jeremiah is said to have gone to Goblanah about the third century. It is clear from the words of the Talmud that Goblanah is a village, and not the district Golan or Goblan (in arabic: Jaulan) after which Goblanah is called.

Apparently Goblanah is the ruin called in Arabic:

^{11a} B. 'Ab. Zarah 26a.

¹² Koheleth Rabba II, 8.

¹³ V. Guérin, *Description de la Palestine: Galilee* II, p. 127.

¹⁴ Y. 'Ab. Zarah II; Meg. III.

Jelebineh, at the edge of the mountain of Golan, near Lake Huleh, and the bridge of the "Daughters of Jacob," over the Jordan, — today beyond the Israeli border, in Syria. G. Schumacher writes of Jelebineh, about 1885: "It has no visible remains of importance, but has the appearance of great antiquity."¹⁵

6. SATANA שטנא Shatana

Rabbi Yohanan is mentioned in the Midrash as being from Satana.¹⁶ Prof. Klein could not identify this name.¹⁷

I think that Satana was a Transjordan settlement, today the Arabic village Shatana in Gilead, between the above mentioned Gerasa and the town Irbid — Arbael of the Bible.

7. 'IKOSH עיקוש 'Akrush

Hiskiya Ish 'Ikosh¹⁸ or Abi-'Akash¹⁹ is mentioned in the Talmud. It seems that he was called after his native place 'Ikosh. Perhaps it was located in the ruins called 'Akrush in the vicinity of 'Acco in the Western Galilee, between the new settlements Yehi'am and Beth Ha-'Emek. It was described thus in the Palestine Exploration Survey, in 1875: "Kh. 'Akrush — Extensive remains of buildings and heaps of stones."²⁰

'Ikosh — 'Akrush recalls the talmudic name Kefar-'Itosh²¹ in Arabic: 'Artush, a ruin in Lower Galil.²² There is a name in the Talmud which comes in two versions: Kazion — Karzion.²³

¹⁵ *The Jaulan*, 1888, p. 163.

¹⁶ *Pesikta De-Rab Kahana*, p. 187b.

¹⁷ *Sefer ha-Yeshub* I, p. 154.

¹⁸ *Yalkut Shim'oni* 139.

¹⁹ B. Bek. 38a, Sifra 7, 4.

²⁰ *SWP* II, 1881, p. 170.

²¹ Y. Erub. I, 'Ab. Zarah 7b.

²² A. Saarisalo, *The Boundary Between Issachar and Naphtali*, 1927, p. 36.

²³ Y. Bez. V, 3; Ber. VIII, 12.

8. SEITOR צִיטור Tayasir

Rabbi Yossi Ish Şeitor is mentioned in the Midrash.²⁴ Şeitor is his native place but it is not identified.

Perhaps it is Tayasir, an Arab village in the mountains of Samaria, in the vicinity of Shechem, eastward. The ruins in Tayasir testify that it was a great settlement in the time of the Romans.

The name Şeitor was changed into Teisar — Tayasir, in the plural form. Other Hebrew place names adopted by the Arabs likewise changed into the plural: Shafir — Sawafir; Kenath — Kanawat; 'Ein Rimmon — Umme-Ramamin, etc.

9. ZUGA זִיגָא Zuk

We have mention in the Talmud Yer. of Rabbi Gamaliel Zuga, who participated in a discussion about the fruit brought from the town Pamias.²⁵ Pamias was an important town in Upper Galilee, today the village called in Arabic: Baniyas, near the Israeli border, in Syria.

I presume that Gamaliel was called after his native place Zuga, related to the Arabic Zuk (Zug), which is a ruined village in the vicinity of the above mentioned Baniyas. The town was called Zuga, which means double, because there were two settlements nearby with the same name. In fact there are today two ruined villages near each another: Zuk Al-Fokani — the upper, and Zuk Al-Tahtani — the lower.

The name Zuga — double, recalls the Arabic name Dubil of a Crusader's ruin in Mount Carmel, and it is a corruption of the French Double.²⁶

²⁴ Vayikra Rabba 24, 3; Tanhuma, Kedoshim 9.

²⁵ Y. Demai II, 1.

²⁶ E. Muellinen, *Beitraege zur Kenntnis des Karmels*, 1908, S. 249.

10. CAŞRTA קַצְרְתָּהּ Jelil

Several Sages called after their native town Caşrta²⁷ are also mentioned in the Talmud. The name comes from the Roman Castra — fortress, military camp.

The Roman Castra appears in the talmudic literature in various versions: Caştra or Gaştra,²⁸ Caşra or Caşrin,²⁹ and Caşrta.³⁰

Castra is the name often given to settlements, which were built around Roman fortresses in Palestine and in the Roman Empire.

One Castra or Gastra was in the vicinity of Haifa.³¹ It was inhabited by Samaritans and therefore called Castra Samaritanorum.³² Today it is a ruin bearing the Arabic name: Kefar e-Samir, the village of the Samaritans. A Castra Judaeorum of the Jews, was in Egypt on the way to Palestine.³³

There was a place called Caşra or Caştra de-Galil — Castra Galilaea³⁴ in Upper Galilee, close to the border of Phoenicia. Its ruins are called in Arabic: Jelil; today they are in the vicinity of the new settlements of Eilon and Goren.

The ruins in Jelil prove that here was a settlement around a fortress, on the top of a hill. I presume that here is the site of Caşerta, the native place of the above mentioned Sages of Israel. In its surrounding area are

²⁷ Yossi ben Caşrta: Y. Shab. II.B., *ibid.* 151b. Izhak bar Caşrta: Midrash Shem. 26, 5. Yohanan ben Caşrta: Shir ha-Shirim Rabba II, 9.

²⁸ B. Sota 13b.

²⁹ Midrash Shemuel.

³⁰ Tosefta, Shab. 13.

³¹ Midrash Lam. I, 17.

³² *Antonini Placentini Itinerarium*, ed. Geyer, p. 160.

³³ *Notitia Dignitatum*.

³⁴ Sifre, Debarim 51.

scattered many ruins, which testify to the existence of Jewish settlements in the time of the Mishna and Talmud.

11. SUMAKA סומקא Sumaka

Rabbi Izhak, the son of Yosef, is once called in the Talmud, Izhak Sumaka,³⁵ perhaps after his native town.

There is a ruin in Mount Carmel called in Arabic: Sumaka; it is in the vicinity of the Druze village Daliya. In the ruins of Sumaka there are interesting remains of a synagogue of the third-fourth century.³⁶

12. PETHORAH פתורה Furut

Yehuda ben Petorah is mentioned in Talmud Yerushalmi.³⁷ I presume he is called after his native place Petorah in Eretz-Israel. It recalls a city with a similar name Pethor (*loc.* Pethorah), the home of Balaam "which is by the river."³⁸

Eusebius, in the fourth century, speaks of Pethorah, the home of Balaam, in his *Onomastikon*, referring to it as Fathura in the land of Judah. "There is a village Fathura, near Beth-Gubrin, on the way to Ghaza,"³⁹ he says.

The name Pethorah remained among the Arabs in the version "Furut," now a ruin in the area between the two new Jewish settlements called by the old names: Beth-Gubrin and Gath.

The Palestine Exploration Survey described this ruin, in 1875, thus: "Khurbet Furut — A large site, with cisterns and much fallen masonry of good size. Apparently a town in the Byzantine period, with an ancient road."⁴⁰

³⁵ B. Yeb. 101a.

³⁶ Kohl-Watzinger, *Antike Synagogen in Galilaea*, 1916, p. 135.

³⁷ Y. Ma'as. Sh. V, 9.

³⁸ Num. 22.5.

³⁹ *Onomastikon*, 1904, p. 168-169.

⁴⁰ *SWP* III, p. 201.

13. PEHORAH פְּחֹרָה Fahurah

Eliezer ben Pehorah⁴¹ is mentioned in the Talmud Yerushalmi. He is called thus perhaps after his native village Pehorah, which means a pottery factory, like the Arabic: Fahurah. In ancient Tiberias there was a suburb called: Pahrta.⁴² Another Pahrta was in the vicinity of the village Yatir, in Upper Galilee, and is mentioned in a description of the northern border.⁴³ Pehar as potter is mentioned in the Aramaic part of the Book of Daniel.⁴⁴

In the mountains of Golan, Transjordan, south of the high road between Israel and Damascus, there is an Arabic village called Fahurah, perhaps the old Pehorah. In its surroundings, in the mountains of Golan there are many remains of ancient synagogues which prove, as do historical records also, the existence of a dense Jewish population in the time of the Mishna and Talmud.

14. MAHIR מְהִיר Mahel

The Sages prohibited the breeding of sheep and goats in the inhabited areas, but permitted doing so in the wilderness of Eretz Israel. They permitted sheep and goats to graze in the area of Mahir. "It is sixteen miles by sixteen miles."⁴⁵

In my opinion Mahir is a name of a settlement and the area was called after it. This is the Arab village Ain Mahel in the mountains of Lower Galilee, between Nazareth and Mount Tabor. The village was called by the

⁴¹ Y. Ma'as. Sh. V, 9.

⁴² Y. Erub. V, 22b.

⁴³ Sifri, Debarim 51; *Sefer ha-Yeshub*.

⁴⁴ Dan. 2.41.

⁴⁵ Y. Pes. IV, 3; B. K. VI, 10; 'Ab. Zarah I, 4.

Crusaders Ain Meher, which is similar to the old Hebrew name.⁴⁶ The region of Ain Mahel is also today land for grazing sheep and goats, as in the olden days.

15. ARABO עֲרֵבו Arabonah

The Sages discussed the ravens who brought food to Elijah the Prophet when he hid himself in the brook of Cherith.⁴⁷ The Talmud says: "What is meant by 'the ravens' (עֲרֵבִים) . . . But perhaps they were so named after the town in which they lived?"⁴⁸ The Midrash adds: "There is a town in the vicinity of Beth-Shean and its name is Araba."⁴⁹ Jerome also says Orebim comes from the town Oreb.⁵⁰ Eusebius mentions that the village Araba is situated about three miles west of Beth-Shean (Scythopolis).⁵¹

I think that the village Arabo is known today by its Arabic name Arabona. It is located to the west of Beth-Shean in the Valley of Jezreel, close to the Israeli border, in the Jordan State.

16. HELEPH הֶלֶף Naheph (Nahef)

Heleph is one of the cities in the region of the tribe of Naphtali,^{52a} known also in the time of the Mishna and Talmud.⁵² Rabbi Jeremiah is said to have taught in Heleph, in the third century.⁵³

⁴⁶ ZDPV, X, 1887, p. 253; R. Roehricht, *Regesta Regni Hierosolymitana*, 1893, p. 321.

⁴⁷ I Kings, 17.6.

⁴⁸ B. Hul. 5a.

⁴⁹ Ber. Rabba 32.

⁵⁰ His commentary on Is. 15.7. See L. Ginzburg: *Jewish Studies in Memory of G. A. Kohut*, 1935, p. 296.

⁵¹ *Onomastikon*, pp. 16–17.

^{52a} Josh. 19.33.

⁵² Y. Meg. I, 1.

⁵³ Y. Erub. II.

In my opinion Heleph remained as the Arab village Naheph, in Upper Galilee, between Zephat and 'Acco. It was known to the Crusaders as: Nef.⁵⁴

Guérin visited Naheph or Nahef about the year 1863, and he found "near a little mosque a certain number of regular blocks and three broken shafts, which prove that there was once here a building of some kind, now destroyed from top to bottom." "Was it a synagogue, later on transformed into a church?"⁵⁵ he asks.

17. MALHA מלחא Malha

Rabbi Abdumai Malha⁵⁶ is mentioned in the Talmud. I think he is called after his native place Malha, which comes from the word Melah — salt. The village was so called because of the salting of fish for export. The talmudic name remained in the Arabic name Malha, a ruined village and a big fountain in Upper Galilee, near the shore of Lake Huleh — Hulata in Talmud, a good fishing area even today.

The name Malha — Salting (fish), recalls the Greek name Tarichaea, a town on the shore of Lake Kinneret. It is derived from the Greek word *tarichos* — salting fish.

⁵⁴ ZDPV, X, 1887, p. 253.

⁵⁵ V. Guérin, *Description de la Palestine: Galilee*, I, p. 452.

⁵⁶ Y. Suk. II, 5. B. M. IV, 9.