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### **“Bethany beyond the Jordan” in Text, Tradition, and Historical Geography (\*)**

#### I. The Readings Βηθανία vs. Βηθαβαρά in John 1,28

In the mid-3rd century CE, Origen elected to read the site of Jesus’ baptism preserved in John 1,28 not as Bethany (ἐν Βηθανία), but as Bethabara (ἐν Βηθαβαρά), despite the fact that the former reading appeared “in nearly all” (σχεδὸν ἐν πᾶσι) of the manuscripts that he knew (*Comm. Jo.* 6.40.204 [PG 14, 269 §24])<sup>(1)</sup>. Origen predicated this text-critical emendation on the complete absence in his day of any site named Bethany east of the Jordan.

Indeed, in his consideration of the contemporary textual exemplars, R. Riesner notes that a few major witnesses (e.g., Alexandrinus [A], Vaticanus [B], and Sinaiticus [Ⲛ]), as well as a few smaller manuscripts from the second and third centuries CE (P<sup>66</sup> and P<sup>75</sup>, respectively), read Βηθανία, suggesting that this should be considered the “majority reading.” The “minority reading” Βηθαβαρά, as well as the many divergent forms thereof (e.g., Βιθαβερα, Βηθεβερα, etc.), is attested by several manuscripts of more recent date<sup>(2)</sup>. Riesner deduces from the preservation of the more difficult Βηθανία<sup>(3)</sup> in the more

(\*) I owe my thanks to Shane Berg and George Parsenios, both good friends and colleagues, who read a draft of this paper and commented on it productively. It would, of course, be injudicious to blame them for any mistakes that remain.

<sup>(1)</sup> I use here the numbering system of the critical edition by C. BLANC, *Origène: Commentaire sur Saint Jean* (SC 157; Paris 1970) II. A similar decision to read Βηθαβαρά here was made by both John Chrysostom (*Hom. Jo.* 17.1 [PG 59, 108]), and Jerome (*Sit.* [PL 23, 931]); see R. RIESNER, *Bethanien jenseits des Jordan*. Topographie und Theologie im Johannes-Evangelium (Giessen – Basel 2002) 13; R. SCHNACKENBURG, *The Gospel according to St. John* (New York 1982) I, 295-296.

<sup>(2)</sup> R. RIESNER, “Bethany Beyond the Jordan (John 1:28): Topography, Theology and History in the Fourth Gospel”, *TynBul* 38 (1987) 32-34; idem, *Bethanien*, 13-18, 43. For a catalogue of the “minority texts”, see W. WIEFEL, “Bethabara jenseits des Jordan (Joh. 1,28)”, *ZDPV* 83 (1967) 72-73.

<sup>(3)</sup> That βηθανία is the *lectio difficilior* is an assessment in congruence with that of other New Testament critics; see, e.g., M. PICCIRILLO, “The Sanctuaries of the Baptism on the East Bank of the Jordan River”, *Jesus and Archaeology* (ed. J.H. CHARLESWORTH) (Grand Rapids, MI 2006) 435; B.M. METZGER, “ἐν βηθα-νία ἐγένετο {C}”, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New

important witnesses that “in many instances there has been a conscious later alteration of the name of the place” from the original Βηθανία to the later Βηθαβαρά<sup>(4)</sup>. There is a general consensus among scholars that there is very little data that would speak in opposition to the primacy of Βηθανία, and although Riesner recognizes the value of the toponymic evidence provided by the Old Syriac and the other “minority” manuscripts, he ultimately concludes that this information points only to the existence of a “local tradition” in which the site of Jesus’ baptism was named Bethabara<sup>(5)</sup>.

Although it thus seems that Βηθανία is the original reading, two considerations mitigate the force of taking that reading as a historically accurate notice of the location of the Baptist’s ministry. First, Riesner cites a literary topos in John that would purportedly confirm this text-critical judgment of the priority of Βηθανία: namely, the fact that “in John’s Gospel Jesus’ way leads from Bethany [1,28; 10,40] to Bethany [11,1]”<sup>(6)</sup>. R. Fortna concurs implicitly with this literary judgment and is, I would argue, correct when he states that “if the reading of *Bethany* is correct, it is perhaps designed by John to provide a balance at the start of the ministry with the other Bethany where it ends...”<sup>(7)</sup>. In fact, Fortna’s recognition of the importance of locale in the fourth gospel, particularly with regard to the literary correspondence between the presumed Bethany of John 10,40 (based on the apparent reference to 1,28) and the Bethany of John 11, provides a serious caveat to claims that Βηθανία is actually the *lectio difficilior* in John 1,28. Although it is difficult to build a strong case for the textual priority of Βηθαβαρά in John 1,28, the redactional nature of that verse mitigates the claim to

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York<sup>3</sup> 1994) 199-200; C.K. BARRETT, *The Gospel according to St John* (London 1965) 146.

<sup>(4)</sup> RIESNER, “Bethany”, 33.

<sup>(5)</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-34; and *idem*, *Bethanien*, 15, 36 (and bibliography in n. 79). RIESNER (*Bethanien*, 15) and R.G. CLAPP (“A Study of the Place-names Gergesa and Bethabara”, *JBL* 26 [1907] 62-83, esp. 76) point to the plurality of orthographic variants of Βηθαβαρά — as opposed to the relative paucity of variants of Βηθανία — to argue that the former name was inserted late and independently by a number of different copyists. RIESNER traces the confusion to the late insertion of a local tradition, while CLAPP credits Origen with the origination of the discrepancy.

<sup>(6)</sup> RIESNER, “Bethany”, 33-34; and *idem*, *Bethanien*, 14, a judgment followed by PICCIRILLO, “Sanctuaries”, 438.

<sup>(7)</sup> R.T. FORTNA, “Theological Use of Locale in the Fourth Gospel”, *Gospel Studies in Honor of Sherman Elbridge Johnson* (eds. M.H. SHEPHERD — E.C. HOBBS) (AThRSupp 3; London 1974) 68.

Βηθανία’s originality as well. Instead, it may be the case that John 1,28 is in fact the gospel writer’s own insertion<sup>(8)</sup>, through which he capitalized on the possibility of the present *inclusio*, substituting Βηθανία for an earlier, historically accurate tradition<sup>(9)</sup>. On this model, the late reading simply replaces a similarly constructed reading.

Second, Riesner’s dismissal of Bethabara as the disingenuous product of “local tradition” fails when we consider the actual breadth of philological evidence in support of Origen’s “minority” report. Origen (*Comm. Jo.* 6.40.206) provided as the Hebrew etymology of Βηθαβαρᾶ the meaning “House of Preparation” (οἶκος κατασκευῆς). The “preparation”, he argues, was fitting for the forerunner of the Christ, who had been sent “to prepare his way before him” (κατασκευάσαι τὴν ὁδὸν αὐτοῦ ἔμπροσθεν αὐτοῦ). In this exegetical move, Origen is undoubtedly alluding to the citation of Mal 3,1a in Mk 1,2: ἰδοὺ ἀποστέλλω τὸν ἄγγελόν μου πρὸ προσώπου σου, ὃς κατασκευάσει τὴν ὁδόν σου.

However, this citation preserves a paraphrasing allusion to the text of Malachi, which does not itself use the verb κατασκευάζω:

הנני שלח מלאכי ופנהדרך לפני

ἰδοὺ ἐγὼ<sup>(10)</sup> ἐξἀποστέλλω τὸν ἄγγελόν μου καὶ ἐπιβλέψεται  
ὁδὸν πρὸ προσώπου μου...

Nor does the verb appear in the LXX rendering of the related Mal 3,23-24 MT (=LXX 3,22-23; Eng. 4,4-5):

הנה אנכי שלח לכם את אליה הנביא לפני בוא יום יהיה הגדול והנורא:  
והשיב לבבאבות אל־בנים

καὶ ἰδοὺ ἐγὼ ἀποστέλλω ὑμῖν Ηλίαν τὸν Θεσβίτην πρὶν ἔλθειν  
ἡμέραν κυρίου τὴν μεγάλην καὶ ἐπιφανῆ, ὃς ἀποκαταστήσει  
καρδίαν πατρὸς πρὸς υἱὸν...

<sup>(8)</sup> Ibid., 67; and idem, *The Gospel of Signs. A Reconstruction of the Narrative Source Underlying the Fourth Gospel* (SNTSMS 11; Cambridge 1970) 174; and below.

<sup>(9)</sup> At most, I would allow the position of B.F. BYRON’s “more liberal” scholars who “might claim that the author has ‘theologized’ the name for some reason or other but a Bethany east of the Jordan was what he wrote and what he meant” (“Bethany Across the Jordan or simply Across the Jordan”, *AusBR* 46 [1998] 38). See also G.L. PARSENIOS – J.M. HUTTON, “Bethany Beyond Jordan and the Theology of Landscape”, forthcoming.

<sup>(10)</sup> The word ἐγὼ appears only in the 3rd century Washington papyrus, and is omitted in LXX<sup>B</sup> and LXX<sup>C</sup>; the inflection of the following verb makes this minus text-critically irrelevant.

The verb κατασκευάζω is used in LXX<sup>B</sup> in contexts of “creating” (ברא; Isa 40,28; 43,7), “fashioning” (חרש; Prov 6,14 [only in B<sup>2</sup>]), “forming” (יצר; Isa 45,7.9), “establishing” (כון *hitpolel*; Num 21,27), “making” (עשה; 2 Chr 32,5; Prov 23,5), and “refining” (צרף; Isa 40,19). Likewise, only once does LXX<sup>B</sup> utilize the related form ἀποσκευάζω to render the Heb. verb פנה in the *piel* (Lev 14,36), but the context there demands that the nature of the “preparation” is one in which the leprous house is emptied.

Moreover, although there is a contextual basis for Origen’s connection between the site of the baptism and the “voice calling in the wilderness” as a voice calling for preparation, there seems to be little or no specific linguistic or textual connection to Isa 40,3, which Mark cites in the verse following the one just cited (Mk 1,3; also Matt 3,3; Lk 3,4). There, all three of the Synoptic Gospels render the verbs of MT Isa 40,3 with ἐτοιμάζω (“prepare”; פנה *piel* “prepare”; see the use of פנה in Mal 3,1) and ποιέω (“make”; ישר *piel* “make straight”). Thus, the etymology provided by Origen would, at first glance, appear to be unsupported by the textual and linguistic evidence.

Several scholars have recognized the difficulty of Origen’s etymology for βηθαβαρᾶ, and — with recourse to the twofold appearance of בית ברה in MT Judg 7,24 — suggested that reading בית ברא instead could provide a reasonable derivation for the name “House of Preparation”<sup>(11)</sup>. In this line of thought, Origen reanalyzed (whether intentionally or unintentionally is unimportant) a known toponym בית ברה as בית עברה<sup>(12)</sup>. Indeed, as noted above, κατασκευάζω appears as the LXX<sup>B</sup> rendering of Heb. ברא in Isa 40,28 and 43,7, and came in Christian patristic literature to have a similar semantic range<sup>(13)</sup>. But this solution seems tenuous to me, since it only obliquely handles the use of κατασκευάζω to render Heb. ברא (which, it must be pointed out, does not appear in *any* of the three OT passages noted above: Isa 40,3; Mal 3,1.23-24). Moreover, Mark’s notion of “preparation”, to which Origen obviously refers, can under no circumstances be immediately derived from the toponym בית ברה.

<sup>(11)</sup> E.g., BLANC, *Origène*, 286 n. 3; see also CLAPP, “Study”, 79 and nn. 61-62.

<sup>(12)</sup> E.g., M.J. LAGRANGE, “Origène, la critique textuelle et la tradition topographique”, *RB* 4 (1895) 502-512, esp. 504-505; CLAPP, “Study”, 79-80 and n. 62; WIEFEL, “Bethabara”, 73-74; RIESNER, *Bethanien*, 35 and n. 77.

<sup>(13)</sup> G.W.H. LAMPE, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford 1961) 718 s.v. “κατασκευάζω” and “κατασκευή”.

Finally, there is no other evidence in the OT that a locale named Beth Bara (בֵּית בָּרָא) ever existed. Thus, I am hesitant to follow this proposed emendation too readily. The solution seems to me to be far more of a textual and traditional nature than of an exegetical one, and is probably simpler than that suggested by Blanc and his predecessors.

Multiple Greek manuscripts (e.g., LXX<sup>AB</sup>) at Exod 35,24 use the nominal form κατασκευῆ “preparation” to render Heb. עֲבֹדָה “work, preparation”, a word that is graphically similar to עֲבָרָה “crossing.” This potential for graphic confusion then should focus our attention on the only OT occurrence of the toponym Βαθαβαρᾶ, in Josh 18,22, where the LXX<sup>B</sup> transcription renders MT בֵּית הַעֲרָבָה “House of the Plain,” a city in the territory of Benjamin (cf. LXX<sup>A</sup> Βηθαβαρά at Josh 15,61 and Βαθαβαρά at Josh 18,22; and LXX<sup>B</sup> Βαθαβαβα at 15,6; 18,18)<sup>(14)</sup>. One might envision two more economical understandings of the evidence presented by these textual witnesses in combination with the tradition preserved by the minority texts at John 1,28 (e.g., Syr<sup>sc</sup>, etc.).

In the first reconstruction, an original בֵּית עֲבָרָה “House of Passage”<sup>(15)</sup> was inadvertently transcribed as בֵּית הָעֲרָבָה in the MT of Josh 15,6.61; 18,22 (cf. also 18,18)<sup>(16)</sup>, and as בֵּית בָּרָה in MT of Judg 7,24<sup>(17)</sup>, while in Mark’s source it had become conflated with the graphically similar, but otherwise unknown, בֵּית עֲבָרָה. Graphically represented, this would appear as:

<sup>(14)</sup> Eusebius (*Onom.* 50.21 nr. 233) lists a Βηθαβαρά, but describes it only as “in the regions near the uninhabitable area” (ἐν τοῖς περὶ τὴν ἀοίκητον), following Symmachus; translation from the convenient recent edition with Greek and Latin text, and English translation: Eusebius, *Onomasticon. The Place Names of Divine Scripture* (eds. R.S. NOTLEY – Z. SAFRAI) (Jewish and Christian Perspectives 9; Boston – Leiden 2005) 52.

<sup>(15)</sup> For the history of this etymology of Βηθαβαρᾶ, see RIESNER, *Bethanien*, 35, and bibliography there.

<sup>(16)</sup> Note the similar instances of metathesis (i.e., Βηθαβαρᾶ) that occurred in manuscripts of Origen’s *Comm. Jo.* and in LXX<sup>scb</sup> Syr<sup>hmg</sup>; METZGER, “ἐν βηθανίᾳ ἐγένετο {C}”, 200 n. 6; WIEFEL, “Bethabara”, 72; G. L. PARSENIOS, “Bethany”, *NIDB* I, 436-437; RIESNER, *Bethanien*, 43; LAGRANGE, “Origène”, 505.

<sup>(17)</sup> W. BORÉE, *Die alten Ortsnamen Palästinas* (Leipzig 1930) 76 n. 5; although cf. J.K. LOTT, “Beth-Barah”, *ABD* I, 682-683.

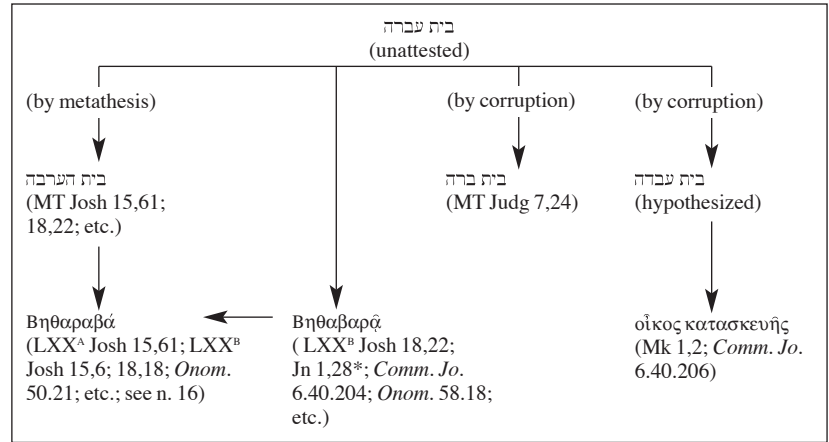


Fig. 1 – Evolutionary Model #1: Textual and Traditional development from an original locale named Bethabara.

The second solution, closely related and similarly dependent on textual and traditional corruption, would suggest that an original בית (ה)ערבה was misanalyzed as בית עברה, which was then corrupted into בית ברה:

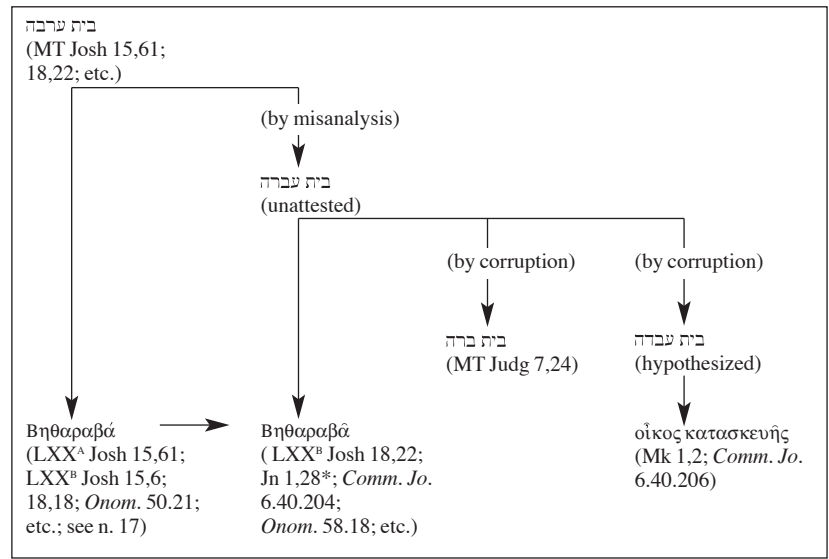


Fig. 2 – Evolutionary Model #2: Textual and Traditional development from an original locale named Beth-Araba.

In either case, it is not Origen’s philological skills that should be blamed for the confusion, but rather the interpretive tradition preserved by Mark<sup>(18)</sup>. That tradition connected a corrupted toponymic antecedent found in the general location of the baptism (i.e., בית עברדה instead of the proper בית עברדה) with the OT passages that were theologically significant for Mark’s presentation of that event (Isa 40,3; Mal 3,1.23-24). That tradition carried as part of its baggage a noun (κατασκευῆ) the verbal counterpart of which (κατασκευάζω) was not used in the OG rendering of any of those passages, but which Mark was able to use as a passable, albeit imperfect, rendering of the verb פנה used in Mal 3,1 and Isa 40,3. The interpretive contrivance, then, is Mark’s. Admittedly, this does not, of course, explain why Origen — who was in this model only the recipient of what might be considered an authentic toponymic tradition Βηθαβαρῶ, and not the originator of a local tradition — could etymologize the Greek form of that toponym, which clearly preserves the *rho* as an accurate rendering of Heb. *resh*, with a word (κατασκευῆ) that had been used to translate Heb. עברדה. This discrepancy may perhaps be chalked up to Origen’s own exegetical interpretation in an attempt to draw together the received traditions, or even simply to an injudicious use of sources. However, this faulty etymology does not immediately impugn the reading Βηθαβαρῶ provided by Origen as inferior to the degree that proponents of the reading Βηθανία in John 1,28 would claim.

In short, reading Βηθανία in John 1,28 as a historically accurate piece of information is problematic on a number of levels. First, the verse itself seems to be an addition by the gospel writer that rearranges the account received from his source, the Signs Source. If the gospel writer did indeed write Βηθανία originally, it can under no circumstances be used as a historical datum without careful scrutiny. Second, there is some slim reconstructable textual support for the preservation of a tradition concerning the existence of a settlement

<sup>(18)</sup> Among the major commentaries, there are few explicit attempts to explain Mark’s use of the verb κατασκευάζω: e.g., A.Y. COLLINS, *Mark. A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN 2007) 133, 135-136; M.E. BORING, *Mark. A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville, KY 2006) 34-36; R.T. FRANCE, *The Gospel of Mark. A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC, Grand Rapids, MI 2002) 60-64; J. MARCUS, *Mark 1-8. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 27; New York 1999) 142-143, 147-149; R.A. GUELICH, *Mark 1-8:26* (WBC 34A; Dallas, TX 1989) 11; C.S. MANN, *Mark. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB; Garden City 1986) 195; V. TAYLOR, *The Gospel according to St. Mark* (London 1966) 153.

named בית עבררה located on or near the Jordan, and possibly for a related interpretive tradition preserved in Mk 1,2-3, which was then picked up by Origen. Therefore, while the priority of the reading Βηθαβαρᾶ in John 1,28 may remain doubtful<sup>(19)</sup>, it has at least been salvaged as a remote possibility. On the other hand, the reading Βηθανία, which may have arisen under literary pressure from the symbolic movement of Jesus to Bethany in John 11, should be problematized to a greater extent than it typically has been. Whether the writer of the Fourth Gospel wrote Βηθαβαρᾶ or not, only a location somewhere in the southern part of the Jordan River valley can have been intended<sup>(20)</sup>. But where exactly was that locale? Setting aside the Bethany/Bethabara question for the moment, the following section attempts to answer that question.

## II. The Itinerary of John 11 in Redaction-Critical Consideration

In his attempts to determine the location of John's "Bethany beyond the Jordan," Riesner provides an overview of previous scholarship<sup>(21)</sup>. The locale has been alternately associated with: a) sites in the Transjordan (Peraea) well removed from the course of the Jordan River, such as Beth Nimrah (Num 32,36; Josh 13,27; cf. Isa 15,6; Jer 48,34; modern *T. el-Bleibil* or *T. Nimrīn*)<sup>(22)</sup> and Betonim (Josh 13,26; modern *Ḥ. Baṭneh*)<sup>(23)</sup>; b) the more familiar Bethany near Jerusalem

<sup>(19)</sup> Cf. METZGER's note ("ἐν βηθανία ἐγένετο {C}", 200) that "if Βηθαβαρᾶ were original, then there is no adequate reason why it should have been altered to βηθανία".

<sup>(20)</sup> Cf. PICIRILLO's enigmatic provision ("Sanctuaries", 443), that "there are two topographic realities that do not exclude each other — Bethabara at the river Jordan and Bethany at the spring of Wadi Kharrar..."

<sup>(21)</sup> The following survey is based on RIESNER's much more thorough presentation of and bibliography for the various arguments ("Bethany", 34-43; idem, *Bethanien*, 43-56).

<sup>(22)</sup> F.F. BRUCE, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI 1983) 51, 66, n. 45; RIESNER ("Bethany", 39; *Bethanien*, 48) points to the manifold problems with such an identification, however, including the difficulty of reading the desired βαθαβαρᾶ in any of the textual witnesses; the presence of Βηθενναβρίς in Josephus (*B.J.* 4.420 [=4.8.4]), which would have been available to Origen as an option; and finally, Eusebius's inclusion of Βηθνεμράν (*Onom.* 44.16-18), lacking any mention of the baptism.

<sup>(23)</sup> Cf. RIESNER for bibliography on other localizations in Peraea (*Bethanien*, 46-48) and for counter-arguments to the sites listed here ("Bethany", 39-40; *Bethanien*, 49-50).



(Jn 11,1.18), which was “opposite” the location on the Jordan at which John had formerly baptized<sup>(24)</sup>; c) sites much further north than suggested by the topography assumed in John, such as the Abarah Ford (*Mahādat* ‘*Abāra*) northeast of Beth Shean<sup>(25)</sup>, the city of Bethsaida, and a site named *et-Tell* north of the Sea of Galilee<sup>(26)</sup>; and d) the region to the east of the Sea of Galilee, Batanaea<sup>(27)</sup> (biblical Bashan). Although the first several suggestions are difficult and require strained logic to support their conclusions, Riesner presents detailed argumentation for this last solution to the problem, and concludes that “Bethany beyond the Jordan” refers to Batanaea on the basis of the geographical implications of the itinerary in John 11, the time-plan in John 1–2, and the various names of the Galileans whom Jesus meets in John 1<sup>(28)</sup>. The lynchpin of this argument is the implied itinerary of Jesus’ movement from “the place where John had been baptizing formerly” (τὸν τόπον ὅπου ἦν Ἰωάννης τὸ πρῶτον βαπτίζων; John

<sup>(24)</sup> P. PARKER, ““Bethany Beyond Jordan””, *JBL* 74 (1955) 260; see also BYRON, “Bethany”, 36-54 for a similar reading of the verse. RIESNER rejects PARKER’s suggestion because it fails to deal adequately with similar occurrences of πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου in John 3,26 and 10,40, which clearly indicate a location on the eastern side of the Jordan (“Bethany”, 34-35); see also FORTNA, “Locale”, 67. Ultimately, PARKER’s analysis is unconvincing, and although BYRON’s association of the baptism with the motif of Joshua crossing into the Promised Land is surely correct (see, e.g., J.M. HUTTON, “Topography, Biblical Traditions, and Reflections on John’s Baptism of Jesus”, *Proceedings of the Second Princeton-Prague Symposium* [ed. J.H. CHARLESWORTH] [Grand Rapids, MI, forthcoming]), it does not at all follow that the phrase “across the Jordan” (πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου) ought to be read from an easterly perspective, as BYRON argues. The phrase seems most likely to be a literal translation of Heb. מַעְבַּר הַיַּרְדֵּן ( / לַיַּרְדֵּן) (“the other side of the Jordan”), the referent of which is ambivalent and entirely dependent on context. Clearly, the phrase designates the western bank in Num 32,32; Deut 3,20.25; etc., but the eastern side in Num 35,14; Deut 1,1.5; 3,8; 4,46, etc., and remains ambiguous without further qualification in Num 22,1; 32,19; 34,15; Deut 4,41.47.49.

<sup>(25)</sup> Neither LAGRANGE (“Origène”, 510) nor H. RIX (“Notes Taken on a Tour in Palestine in the Spring of 1901”, *PEFQS* [1903] 159-162) was able to verify the existence of the name in the area; instead, RIX notes that the ford went by the name *Hammud*, or simply *Mahāda* (“ford”). Cf. also RIESNER, *Bethanien*, 50-51.

<sup>(26)</sup> Cf. however, RIESNER (“Bethany”, 42; *Bethanien*, 52-53), who catalogues the constellation of typographical and logical errors that permitted these faulty identifications.

<sup>(27)</sup> E.g., B. PIXNER, *Wege des Messias und Stätten der Urkirche* (ed. R. RIESNER) (Giessen – Basel 1991) 173-174; RIESNER “Bethany”, 29-63; and idem, *Bethanien*, 54-82.

<sup>(28)</sup> RIESNER, “Bethany”, 43-48; idem, *Bethanien*, 71-77.

10,40) to Bethany near Jerusalem (Jn 11,1.17-18). Riesner adduces several pieces of data that, when viewed in light of each other, seem to narrow the possibilities of Bethany beyond the Jordan's location:

- The traditional location of Bethany beyond the Jordan in the *Wādi el-Ḥarrār* just east of the *Maḥādat Ḥaḡla* (see below) lies only a day's travel away from Jerusalem.
- When the messengers arrive, Jesus addresses Lazarus' "illness" (ἀσθένεια; John 11,4), already anticipating Lazarus' death. Yet, it is only two days later, immediately before leaving that Jesus seems to have knowledge of Lazarus' death (vv. 6.11.13). Accordingly, the death of Lazarus "must...be reckoned from the departure of Jesus from Bethany beyond the Jordan," argues Riesner<sup>(29)</sup>.
- Riesner concludes that the notice that "Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days" (τέσσαρας ἡδὴ ἡμέρᾱ ἔχοντα ἐν τῷ μνημείῳ; v. 17) upon Jesus' arrival in Bethany means that the movement from Bethany beyond Jordan to Bethany near Jerusalem entailed four complete days of travel. Since a day's march was approximately 30-40 km<sup>(30)</sup>, Bethany beyond Jordan must lie *ca.* 150 km from Jerusalem<sup>(31)</sup>.

Although painstakingly argued, Riesner's solution suffers from a multitude of logical errors.

First, the assumption that Jesus' statement of Lazarus' death and his departure for Bethany are necessarily coincident is negated by the theology of John's Gospel. As W.H. Cadman has pointed out (and as Riesner himself quoted), "In allowing Lazarus to die, [Jesus] was providing occasion for the revelation of himself as ἡ ἀνάστασις καὶ ἡ ζωὴ (11:25)"<sup>(32)</sup>. The tarrying of two days is intended by Jesus as a guarantee that there will be work to be done upon his arrival in Bethany. Therefore, Lazarus may have died immediately after Jesus' receipt of the message (or, even before, if we may presume human limitations to Jesus' knowledge), and the journey's duration need not

<sup>(29)</sup> PIXNER, *Wege*, 170-171; RIESNER, "Bethany", 44; idem, *Bethanien*, 72.

<sup>(30)</sup> See RIESNER, "Bethany", 44 n. 84; idem, *Bethanien*, 73 and sources cited there, including Mishnah (*Ta'an* 1.3), Talmud (*bPes* 93b).

<sup>(31)</sup> RIESNER, "Bethany", 44-45.

<sup>(32)</sup> W.H. CADMAN, "The Raising of Lazarus (John 10,40-11,53)", *TU* 73 (1959) 423-434, esp. 426, cited by RIESNER, "Bethany", 44; idem, *Bethanien*, 72. For a more complete discussion of the complexity of John 11, see F.J. MOLONEY, "Can Everyone Be Wrong? A Reading of John 11:1-12:18", ID., *The Gospel of John. Text and Context* (Boston – Leiden 2005) 214-240, esp. 219-222.

be reckoned from the exact time of Lazarus’ death, but rather possibly as beginning two days after that event.

Second, as noted above, several ancient sources provide the rough figure of 30-40 km (= ca. 18.5-25 miles) as a full day’s travel for a band of healthy men. Although this figure provides a reasonable gauge for heuristic purposes, it does not take into account elevation gain and loss. A common contemporary formula for calculating pace while hiking and backpacking is to divide the number of miles by two, then to add an extra hour for each one thousand feet (ca. 300 m) climbed<sup>(33)</sup>. This formula, moreover, does not take into account the extra time needed to descend steeply graded trails — an added consideration, if Jesus and his disciples were descending from the Transjordanian plateau. The additional time required for a net elevation loss from Bashan to the Jordan Valley and the corresponding elevation gain from the Jordan Valley to Jerusalem are data — admittedly, a relatively small proportion of a four-day journey, but a significantly greater proportion of a two day journey — which Riesner has not taken fully into account.

Third, and most destructive to Riesner’s reconstructed time-line, is the textual history of the Gospel of John, and that book’s dependence on an earlier Signs Source, as already noted above<sup>(34)</sup>. Riesner declared that the source division of John is “höchst problematisch”<sup>(35)</sup> and dismissed Fortna’s findings rather cavalierly:

Manchmal müssen auch so versierte Literarkritiker wie Professor Fortna ... sich mit trivialen Fragen wie der Topographie befassen. Und gelegentlich sind dabei die Ergebnisse bemerkenswert. Bethanien jenseits des Jordan mag nicht existiert haben, vielleicht hat es nicht einmal Bethanien geheißen, aber auf alle Fälle lag es im Süden!

However, this comment too quickly dismisses Fortna’s argument. Working without the recognition made above that the use of *κατασκευάζω* in Mk 1,2 may preserve an authentic tradition concerning the geographic coincidence of the baptismal site with the toponym *עברת* בית (which had become *בית עברת* in a tradition preserved in Mark’s

<sup>(33)</sup> E.g., K. BERGER, *Hiking and Backpacking. A Complete Guide* (Trailside Series; New York 1995) 31.

<sup>(34)</sup> FORTNA, *Gospel of Signs*; and idem, “Locale”. Cf. recently H. THYEN, “Liegt dem Johannesevangelium eine Semeia-Quelle zugrunde?” *Studien zum Corpus Iohanneum* (WUNT 214; Tübingen 2007) 443-452; and the larger criticism of the Semeia Hypothesis as a whole by G. VAN BELLE, *The Signs Source in the Fourth Gospel. Historical Survey and Critical Evaluation of the Semeia Hypothesis* (BETL 116; Leuven 1994) esp. 370-377.

<sup>(35)</sup> RIESNER, *Bethanien*, 43.

source, yielding οἶκος κατασκευῆς for Origen), it would have been impossible for Fortna to fully ground his southern localization of the presumed locale Bethabara. But this recognition, combined with Fortna's detailed look at the likely textual development of the Gospel of John, calls into question Riesner's hard-fought position.

Fortna has, in my opinion, convincingly shown that the Gospel of John's topographic notices all work towards the gospel writer's theological schema<sup>(36)</sup>. Topographic notices, while theologically meaningful in the Gospel, remain a product of redaction and therefore potentially unreliable as a historically verisimilitudinous itinerary of Jesus' movements without further critical study. The case at hand is one such example of a relatively minor textual redaction effected by the author that has led to significant topographical reorganization of Jesus' movements. This difficulty seems to have gone unrecognized by all those who would construct an itinerary unproblematically on the basis of John 1–2<sup>(37)</sup>, and particularly on John 11: because the notice just before the Lazarus episode (John 11) places Jesus at that “place where John had been baptizing formerly” (τὸν τόπον ὅπου ἦν Ἰωάννης τὸ πρῶτον βαπτίζων; John 10,40), most scholars — including Riesner (and even Fortna himself!)<sup>(38)</sup> — have assumed that Jesus was at Bethany beyond the Jordan when he received word of Lazarus' illness. But the text provides only the description of the location as “across the Jordan”: Καὶ ἀπῆλθεν πάλιν πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου εἰς τὸν τόπον ὅπου ἦν Ἰωάννης τὸ πρῶτον βαπτίζων... (Jn 10,40).

The phrase πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου is used only twice elsewhere in the Gospel of John, respectively, 1,28 and 3,26. Fortna judged the first of these verses (1,28) to be a Johannine addition to a testimonial about Jesus' nature (1,19–34) taken over wholly from the Signs Source<sup>(39)</sup>. That source, which did not specify the locale in which the Baptist's testimonial took place, seems to have assumed that this “introduction to the signs was set, like the first four of them, in the north”<sup>(40)</sup>. The

<sup>(36)</sup> FORTNA, “Locale”, 58–95.

<sup>(37)</sup> E.g., M.-É. BOISMARD – A. LAMOUILLE, *Synopse des Quartes Évangiles III. L'Évangile de Jean* (Paris 1987) 99–100, followed by both PIXNER, *Wege*, 171–172; and RIESNER, *Bethanien*, 73–76.

<sup>(38)</sup> FORTNA, “Locale”, 78: “Now...he withdraws from Judea...to the Baptist's original place of activity — presumably the Bethany of 1:28, where Jesus had first appeared” (emphasis added).

<sup>(39)</sup> *Ibid.*, 67; see also FORTNA, *Gospel of Signs*, 174.

<sup>(40)</sup> FORTNA, “Locale”, 67–68.

gospel writer has, then, artificially shifted the geographic location of the episode, presumably so that it is in conformity with the Synoptic Gospels’ location of the baptism in the wilderness of Judea. Fortna then hypothesizes that the following episode (i.e., John 1,35-49) was, in fact, introduced by what is now John 3,23-24: “John was also baptizing at Aenon near Salem...” (ἦν δὲ καὶ ὁ Ἰωάννης βαπτίζων ἐν Αἰνῶν ἐγγυὸς τοῦ Σαλείμ...)<sup>(41)</sup>. If Fortna’s hypothesis is correct — and I believe it is — that short statement of the Baptist’s ministry can be taken as a localization of Jesus’ baptism (according to the Signs Source) not at the Jordan River, but rather at Aenon<sup>(42)</sup>. This locale, to which I return briefly below, corresponds quite well with the itinerary in John 11, if we assume that the movement from “the place where John had been baptizing formerly” to Bethany took two days.

Once the author of the Gospel of John had shifted the “Aenon” notice to its current position (3,23), and inserted the “Bethany” notice (1,28), it would have been very easy to add the phrase πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου in both 3,26 and 10,40 in order to tie together all three verses locating the baptismal site on the eastern side of the Jordan. Indeed, excising the phrase from each of the latter two verses (3,26; 10,40) yields a completely reasonable remaining syntactical structure:

“ῥαββί, ὃς ἦν μετὰ σοῦ, ᾧ σὺ μεμαρτύρηκας...”  
(John 3,26)

Καὶ ἀπῆλθεν πάλιν εἰς τὸν τόπον ὅπου ἦν Ἰωάννης τὸ πρῶτον βαπτίζων...  
(John 10,40)

Had Riesner been looking for a locale named Αἰνῶν located about two days’ travel from Jerusalem instead of a locale named Βηθανία four days’ travel from the same city, he would have found it quite easily. The placement of the baptismal site at the more northerly Αἰνῶν also alleviates the tensions that Riesner adduced in John 1<sup>(43)</sup>.

Because Riesner’s identification of Βηθανία fails, the only serious contender for the baptismal site is the traditional placement of Jesus’ baptism at the *el-Mağtas/Ḥağla* series of fords over the Jordan River,

<sup>(41)</sup> Ibid., 68; idem, *Gospel of Signs*, 179-180.

<sup>(42)</sup> Cf. recently H. THYEN, “Ainon bei Salim als Taufort des Johannes (Joh 3,23)”, *Studien zum Corpus Iohanneum* (WUNT 214; Tübingen 2007) 467-478.

<sup>(43)</sup> RIESNER, *Bethanien*, 73-77.

directly east of Jericho<sup>(44)</sup>. This site has the advantage both of a long history of traditional recognition (over against the tepid recognition of Bashan)<sup>(45)</sup>, and of providing a rationale for John's enigmatic textual transfer of Jesus' baptism from its original location in the Signs Source at Aenon to a site compatible with that named by the Synoptic Gospels. Finally, we have seen that the traditional data preserved — perhaps even unintentionally — by Origen suggest a location in the Jordan Valley, near the biblical ביתהערבה.

Of the *el-Mağtas* or *Hağla* ford as the historical referent of the baptismal site named in John 1,28, Riesner concludes only that the information available in the textual witness to the reading Βηθαβαρῶν “speaks for the acceptance of a local tradition. But when we attempt to discover the place referred to in John 1,28 on the basis of the statements of Origen, we find that more problems emerge than a solution”<sup>(46)</sup>. Riesner is undoubtedly correct in his assessment that Origen's solution is replete with problems, but a historical-geographical study of biblical and post-biblical data points the way toward a more firm location of the Baptist's ministry.

### III. Biblical and Post-biblical Traditions on the Location of Bethabara

Although Origen did not specify the exact location of Bethabara in his *Commentary on John*, early Christian pilgrim and geographic literature contains a few indications that the traditional site of the town was to be located near the *el-Mağtas* and *Hağla* fords. In 333 CE the Pilgrim of Bourdeaux claimed to have been shown at a site on the Jordan five miles above the river's outlet into the Dead Sea “the place where the Lord was baptized by John, and above the far bank at the same place is the hillock from which Elijah was taken up to heaven”<sup>(47)</sup>.

<sup>(44)</sup> I do not discount the possible validity of the tradition locating the site ca. 2 km from the Jordan River in the *Wādi el-Ḥarrār*; see, e.g., RIESNER, *Bethanien*, 21, 23; H. GESE, “Der Johannesprolog”, *Zur Biblischen Theologie. Alttestamentliche Vorträge* (BET 78; Munich 1977) 152-201, here 198 n. 29. Such a location would not significantly affect the argument made here.

<sup>(45)</sup> For a representative bibliography of those who locate the Bethany of John 1,28 at the *el-Mağtas* and *Hağla* fords, see RIESNER, *Bethanien*, 40 n. 95.

<sup>(46)</sup> RIESNER, “Bethany”, 33-34.

<sup>(47)</sup> *Itinerarium Burdigalense* in *Itineraria et alia geographica* (CCSL 175; Tournhout 1965) 19: Inde ad Iordane, ubi Dominus a Iohanne baptizatus est, milia quinque. Ibi est locus super flumen, monticulus in illa ripa, ubi raptus est

Eusebius of Caesarea picked up Origen’s description, glossing Βηθαβαρά as “beyond the Jordan where John was baptizing” (ὅπου ἦν Ἰωάννης βαπτίζων, πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου; *Onom.* 58.18 nr. 290)<sup>(48)</sup>. Jerome (*Sit.* [PL 23, 931]) followed suit, adding relatively little to the description<sup>(49)</sup>, although he did preserve the reading “Bethany” in the Vulgate. Unfortunately, none of these sources distinguishes the location of the site any more specifically, although each attests to a tradition of Bethabara as an actual locale somewhere near the Jordan River, as a text-critical examination of John 1,28 and the related traditions suggests (see above).

This dearth of evidence for a more precise localization of Bethabara was alleviated with the discovery of the Madaba Mosaic Map (ca. 560). In contradistinction to John 1,28, Origen, Eusebius, and Jerome, all of whom apparently situated the locale on the eastern side of the Jordan River, the Madaba Map identifies that site (“Bethabara of Saint John of [?] the Baptism”; Βεθαβαρά/ τὸ τοῦ ἁγίου Ἰωάννου/ τοῦ βαπτίσματος) on the river’s western bank<sup>(50)</sup>. This location of Bethabara west of the Jordan on the Madaba Mosaic Map preserves the tradition of that site’s location first recorded by Theodosius (ca. 530; *De situ terrae sanctae* 20)<sup>(51)</sup>, but the tradition itself “must have been

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Helias in caelum [598.1-3]. I use the translation here of J. WILKINSON, *Egeria’s Travels to the Holy Land* (Warminster 1981) 161, §598. Since at least the Byzantine period, that site on the eastern bank has been known as *Ġebel Mār Elyās* (“the Hill of Lord Elijah”); *ibid.*, 161 n. 7. However, it is quite possible that the pilgrim was citing a prechristian tradition, according to RIESNER, *Bethanien*, 21. See recently R. KHOURI, “Where John Baptized: Bethany beyond the Jordan,” *BAR* 31 (2005) 34-43, esp. 41.

<sup>(48)</sup> Eusebius adds: καὶ δείκνυται ὁ τόπος, ἐν ᾧ καὶ πλείους τῶν ἀδελφῶν εἰς ἔτι νῦν τὸ λουτρὸν φιλοτιμοῦνται λαμβάνειν, “The place is shown where even today many of the brothers still endeavor to receive a bath.” Translation that of NOTLEY – SAFRAI, *Onomasticon*, 59.

<sup>(49)</sup> Jerome: Bethabara trans Jordanem, ubi Joannes in poenitentiam baptizabat, unde et usque hodie plurimi de fratribus, hoc est de numero credentium, ibi renasci cupientes vitali gurgite baptizantur [PL 23, 931]. See also M. AVI-YONAH, *The Madaba Mosaic Map with Introduction and Commentary* (Jerusalem 1954) 38 nr. 7.

<sup>(50)</sup> *Ibid.*, 38-39 nr. 7, pls. 1-2.

<sup>(51)</sup> In CCSL 175, 121-122. That Theodosius found Bethabara on the west side of the river is the judgment of AVI-YONAH (*Madaba Mosaic Map*, 39), who argues this datum based on the fact that Theodosius connects the site with Elisha’s fountain. Cf., however, WIEFEL (“Bethabara”, 76-77), who argues for the site’s location on the eastern bank, as Theodosius had approached from Livias.

earlier”<sup>(52)</sup>. Despite the discrepancy between these variant locations of Bethabara, one might assume a quite simple solution to the problem of Bethabara in either of the models proposed above: the toponym “Bethabara” — whether original or the result of phonological metathesis motivated by etiological misanalysis — did not refer to a settlement per se, but rather specifically to the fords over the Jordan River (hence, the plural form τὰ Βηθαβαρᾶ given by Origen [*Comm. Jo.* 6.40.205])<sup>(53)</sup>, currently spanning about 2 km of river length from *el-Mağtas* (the current location commemorating the baptism near St. John’s Convent and *Qaṣr al-Yahūd*) to the *Maḥādat Ḥağla* (the formerly recognized site of the baptism *ca.* 1.5 km further south)<sup>(54)</sup>. This proposal not only accounts for the paucity of contemporaneous archaeological remains at the proposed site on the Jordan River, but could explain why “Bethany” was preserved in the most reliable manuscripts of John: there was no settlement Bethabara to which that name referred.

Yet, the location of the ford over the Jordan named Bethabara remains relatively fixed by the Madaba Mosaic Map. The site is just north of the outlet of the Jordan River into the Dead Sea, and to the southeast of Jericho. Nearby on the western bank one finds both Gilgal “and the twelve stones” (Γαλγαλα τὸ καὶ Δωδεκαλιθον), and the “[Threshing-] Floor of Atad, now Bethagla” (Ἀλων Ἀταθ ἡ νῦν/Βηθαγλα)<sup>(55)</sup>. Just over the river, on the eastern bank, is found “Aenon now Sapsaphas” (Αἰνων ἔνθα/ νῦν ὁ Σαπσαφας)<sup>(56)</sup>. It is clear that the map here preserves a tradition in which the Aenon at which John baptized (Jn 3,23) was located at or very near the Bethabara ford; this locale is named as the baptismal site by the Pilgrim of Bourdeaux (see above), as well as a number of later Christian writers<sup>(57)</sup>. The map also preserves the traditional location of John’s ministry — and, as discussed above, the locale at which the Signs Source may have placed

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Only with the testimony of the Bourdeaux Pilgrim, argues WIEFEL, do we hear of the site’s commemoration on the western bank.

<sup>(52)</sup> AVI-YONAH, *Madaba Mosaic Map*, 39. The Pilgrim of Piacenza (*ca.* 570) mentions commemorative buildings on the western bank as well; *Itinerarium* 12 in CCSL 175, 135-136; RIESNER, *Bethanien*, 25-32.

<sup>(53)</sup> Cf. RIESNER, “Bethany”, 38; *idem*, *Bethanien*, 36.

<sup>(54)</sup> See already RIESNER, *Bethanien*, 36-37.

<sup>(55)</sup> AVI-YONAH, *Madaba Mosaic Map*, 36-37 nr. 5, and 39 nr. 8, pls. 1-2.

<sup>(56)</sup> *Ibid.*, 37 nr. 6, pls. 1-2.

<sup>(57)</sup> For a list, see *ibid.*, 37 nr. 6.



Jesus’ baptism before the gospel writer brought the source into conformity with the Synoptics — at “Aenon near Salim” (Jn 3,23) further to the north (Αινων ἢ ἐγγύς τοῦ Σάλημ), about 8 miles south of Scythopolis (biblical Beth Shean)<sup>(58)</sup>. That more northern site was visited by the pilgrim Egeria in the late 4th century<sup>(59)</sup>, and may have been a conditioning factor in John Lightfoot’s location of Bethabara at the Abarah Ford to the northeast of Beth Shean<sup>(60)</sup>.

Riesner rightfully criticized Lightfoot’s location of Bethabara, stating that “today one usually accepts the location as being a region much further to the south (somewhere opposite the mouth of the Jabbok)”<sup>(61)</sup>. But if we anchor Bethabara to the location of בית הערבה in Josh 15,6.61; 18,22 (cf. also 18,18), we find that even the placement of the locale at the mouth of the Jabbok is too far north. In those verses, the city serves as a waypoint in the boundary between Judah and Benjamin (15,6), and is claimed by both Judah (15,61) and Benjamin (18,22). Indeed, it would appear that the Gideon narrative, in which ביה בררה appears (Judg 7,24 *bis*), entails a crossing near the mouth of the Jabbok, since Sukkoth and Penuel (Judg 8,5-9) lie in the area surrounding the alluvial plain of the Jabbok<sup>(62)</sup>. But this does not mean that seizing “the waters as far as Beth Barah, and the Jordan” (Judg

<sup>(58)</sup> Ibid., 35-36 nr. 1, pl. 1.

<sup>(59)</sup> Ibid., citing the itinerary of Egeria (15.1); see WILKINSON, *Egeria’s Travels*, 110-111 and map on p. 109. Cf., however, J. MURPHY-O’CONNOR, “John the Baptist and Jesus: History and Hypotheses”, *NTS* 36 (1990) 359-374, esp. 364-365 (quote from p. 365), who identified Aenon with the one km line comprising five springs “[o]n the eastern slope of Mount Gerizim” near to the modern village Sālim, about 4.5 km east of *T. Balāṭa* (biblical Shechem).

<sup>(60)</sup> J. LIGHTFOOT (*Horae Hebraicae et Talmudicae in Quattuor Evangelistas* [ed. J.B. CARPZOV] [Leipzig 1670] 911-916, subsequently published in English as *Horae Hebraicae et Talmudicae. Hebrew and Talmudical Exercitationes* [Oxford 1859] I, 327-333, esp. 332-333, cited in RIESNER, “Bethany”, 41) also “identified Bethabara with the Bethbarah of Judges 7:24” — a judgment with which I have concurred above — but the location so far north is inconsistent with all the evidence for the location of Bethabara, and can only be related to the existence of a *Mahādat ‘Abāra* in the vicinity of Beth Shean; see D.A. DORSEY (*The Roads and Highways of Ancient Israel* [Baltimore 1991] 111), who notes that the ford was, in periods after the Iron Age, the most important ford of the region; and C.R. CONDER – H.H. KITCHENER, *The Survey of Western Palestine* (London 1882) II, 79.

<sup>(61)</sup> RIESNER, “Bethany”, 41; see also idem, *Bethanien*, 51-52; and Y. AHARONI – M. AVI-YONAH, *The Carta Bible Atlas* (Jerusalem 2002) 63, map 76.

<sup>(62)</sup> See, e.g., J.M. HUTTON, “Mahanaim, Penuel, and Transhumance Routes: Observations on Genesis 32-33 and Judges 8”, *JNES* 65 (2006) 161-178.

7,24) provides a location of Beth Barah near the outlet of the Jabbok. Rather, it indicates the furthestmost limit of Ephraim's capabilities for action in the Jordan Valley, potentially much further south.

#### IV. Bethabara, Beth Abarah, and Beth ha-Arabah in Historical Geography

If either model suggested above is correct, in which case בית הערבה, בית ברה, and Βηθαβαρᾶ all were derived somehow from the same toponymic antecedent, the locale may be identified more precisely at or very near the *Mahādāt Ḥaḡla*. In Josh 15,6-7; 18,17-19, the Judahite-Benjaminite border proceeds from Beth Hoglah (בית־חגלה; 15,6; 18,19)<sup>(63)</sup> northward to Beth ha-Arabah (בית הערבה; 15,6; 18,18 LXX<sup>B</sup>; cf. MT הערבה), whence it continues by the otherwise unknown Rock of Bohan (אבן בהן; 15,6; 18,17)<sup>(64)</sup> towards Gilgal (גלגל; 15,7; cf. 18,17 [גלילות, Γαλιλιωθ]), which is “opposite the Ascent of Adummim” (נכח למעלה אדמים; 15,7; 18,17), the southern flank of the *Wādi el-Qilt*, up which runs the more direct variation of the modern Jerusalem-Jericho road. Although Gilgal has traditionally been identified with *Ḥ. Muḡḡir* (193.143)<sup>(65)</sup> north of modern Jericho, the information provided by Josh 15,6-7; 18,17-19 may indicate a location to the southeast of Jericho where “several reliable...attestations” place a toponym *Ġalḡala* (196.139), which preserves the ancient name<sup>(66)</sup>. This location

<sup>(63)</sup> Indeed, it is Beth Hoglah, identified in the area of modern *‘Ēn/Qaṣr/Dēr Ḥaḡla*, ca. 4.5 km west of the *Mahādāt Ḥaḡla*, that has leant that for its present name. See, e.g., Y. ELITZUR, *Ancient Place Names in the Holy Land. Preservation and History* (Jerusalem – Winona Lake, IN 2004) 37-38; F.M. ABEL, *Géographie de la Palestine* (Paris 1967) II, 48, 274; J. SIMONS, *The Geographical and Topographical Texts of the Old Testament* (Leiden 1959) 138, §314.

<sup>(64)</sup> ABEL (*Géographie*, II, 48) identifies the “Rock of Bohan” with *Haḡar el-Aṣbaḥ*, a stone feature on the southern wall of the *Wādi Daber* (i.e., the lower course of the *W. Mukallik*), but this identification is predicated on the assumption that Gilgal may be identified with *Ḥān es-Sahl*, and in my opinion therefore seems too far south; I prefer to leave the feature unidentified, but in the *Gōr* somewhere around the *W. el-Qilt*.

<sup>(65)</sup> Y. AHARONI, *The Land of the Bible. A Historical Geography* (trans. A. RAINEY) (Philadelphia, PA 1979) 435; D. BALY, *The Geography of the Bible. A Study in Historical Geography* (New York 1957) 202, following J. MUILENBURG, “The Site of Ancient Gilgal”, *BASOR* 140 (1955) 11-27; cf. ABEL, *Géographie*, II, 336-337.

<sup>(66)</sup> E.g., A. ALT, “Das Institut im Jahre 1924”, *Palästina Jahrbuch* 21 (1925) 5-58, here 27 and bibliography in 27 n. 1; ELITZUR, *Ancient Place Names*,

lies just west of the *H. ‘Ēn el-Ġarabe* (197.139), which would seem to preserve the name of biblical Beth ha-Arabah (see fig. 3) <sup>(67)</sup>.

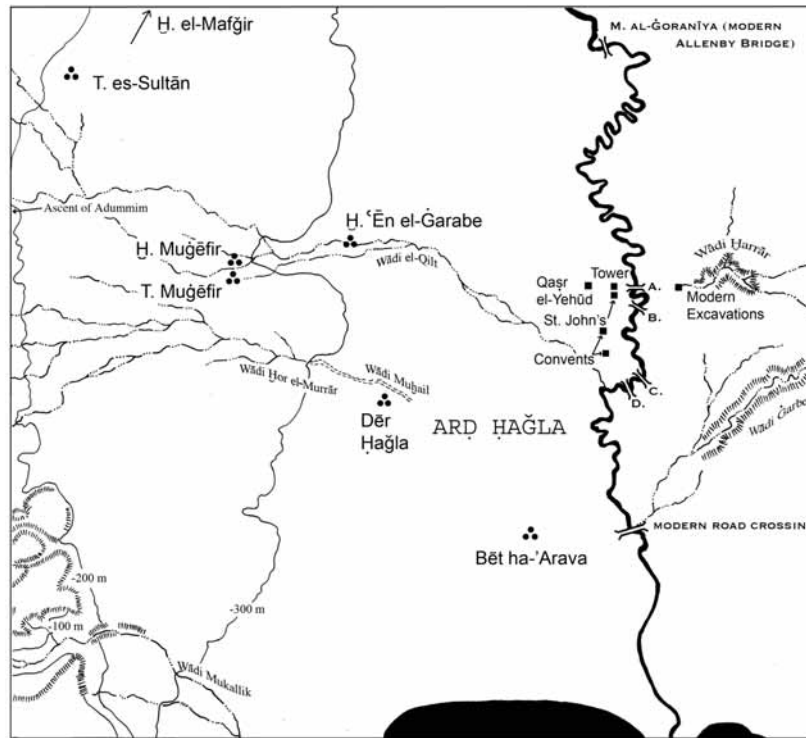


Fig. 3: The southern course of the Jordan River, showing significant archaeological features, as well as major wādī's and Jordan River fords, after map sheets 3053 I and 3153 IV in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Army Map Service) Jordan 1:50,000 series (K737), edition 1-AMS. The four lettered features of the el-Maġtas/Haġla ford system are: A) M. el-Maġtas; B) Modern Baptismal Site; C) Old Baptismal Site; D) M. Haġla. © J. Hutton.

146 and 146 n. 9; SIMONS (*Geographical and Topographical Texts*, 139-140, §314) and ABEL (*Géographie*, II, 48; cf. II, 336-337) place Gilgal at *Ĥān es-Sahl* (*Ĥān al-aḥmar*).

<sup>(67)</sup> E.g., ALT, “Institut”, 26-27; AHARONI, *Land of the Bible*, 431; H.O. THOMPSON, “Beth-Arabah,” *ABD* I, 681; ABEL, *Géographie*, II, 278; SIMONS, *Geographical and Topographical Texts*, 139, §314. Cf. map sheet 3153 IV in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Army Map Service) Jordan 1:50,000 series (K737), edition 1-AMS, which locates a set of ruins named “Beit ha ‘Arava” (marked as Bēt ha-‘Arava in fig. 3) just west of the southernmost Jordan ford (where the Jerusalem-Nā‘ūr Road now crosses the Jordan River).

This preservation of the ancient name would be somewhat unexpected, however, since both possible original names that we have been considering so far (Beth ha-Arabah and Beth Abarah) derive from Protosemitic (PS) roots beginning with *'ayin* [cf. Heb. עבר “to pass over”<sup>(68)</sup> and Heb. ערב “dry, infertile,” especially the name of the Jordan Valley, עֶרְבָה<sup>(69)</sup>], whereas the name here begins with *gayin* (*Ġarabe*). This datum may suggest that the modern Arabic name may be linked not to any purported precursor derived from the Hebrew reflex of a PS *\*√'rb*, but rather related to PS *\*√ġrb*, realized in Hebrew as ערב “to grow dark”<sup>(70)</sup>, and particularly familiar as the name of the Euphrates poplar (*Populus euphratica*), עֶרְבָה<sup>(71)</sup> (e.g., Isa 44,4; Ps 137,2; Lev 23,40; and Job 40,22). Indeed, W. Borée identified *Ḥ. 'En el-Ġarabe* as the site of Beth ha-Arabah, having found Euphrates poplars growing there<sup>(72)</sup>.

If *Ḥ. 'En el-Ġarabe* is in fact to be identified as an authentic preservation of the toponymic precursor of Beth ha-Arabah, Beth Barah, and Beth Abarah, then a whole series of linguistic and textual misanalyses falls into place, most probably along the lines of Model 2 (outlined above and made explicit here):

(1) The toponym was originally *\*bēt ġarabi* (“House of Poplars/Willows”).

(2) Misanalysis in early Hebrew, later compounded by the phonological collapse of *\*/ġ/* and *\*/'/* to */'/* by the 1st century CE<sup>(73)</sup>, yielded */bēt «arabā/*. The Hebrew- and Aramaic-speaking authors and tradents of most biblical texts presumably analyzed the new pronunciation as “House of the Plain”.

<sup>(68)</sup> BDB, s.v. עבר (716b-720b); HALOT, s.v. עבר I (778b-780b); compare, e.g., Arab. *√'br* (E.W. LANE, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* [London 1865] I/5, 1936c-1937a); *'ibrun* “bank, side” (1939a); *ma'birun* “A place where a river is crossed; a ferry; a bank, or side, of a river, prepared for crossing” (1938c-1939a); etc.

<sup>(69)</sup> BDB, s.v. ערב IV (787a-b); and HALOT, s.v. ערב (878b); עֶרְבָה (878b); עֶרְבָה III (880a-b); compare Arab. *'irbun* “such as is dried up” (LANE, *Lexicon*, I/5, 1993a).

<sup>(70)</sup> BDB, s.v. ערב V (787b-788a); HALOT, s.v. ערב V (877b); and the related noun עֶרְבָה I (877b-878a); compare Arab. *√ġrb* (LANE, *Lexicon*, I/6, 2240b-2244c) meaning “to go away” and, by extension, the sun’s “going away” (to the west): *ġarbīyun* “of or relating to the west, or place of sunset; western” (2242c); or “growing dark”: *ġurābun* “a certain black bird” (2243a; cf. Heb. עֶרְבָה).

<sup>(71)</sup> BDB, s.v. עֶרְבָה II (788a); HALOT, s.v. עֶרְבָה I (879b); compare Arab. *ġarabun* “willow” (specifically *Salix babylonica*; LANE, *Lexicon*, I/6, 2242c).

<sup>(72)</sup> W. BORÉE, *Ortsnamen*, 78 n. 4; ALT, “Institut”, 27.

(3.a) Etiological misanalysis in the southern Levant, predicated on the proximity of a few major fords to the settlement bēt ‘arabā, occasioned the development of a new toponym bēt ‘abarā (בֵּית עַבְרָה), which much later became Greek Βηθαβαβᾶ. Moreover, the full toponym bēt ‘abarā (בֵּית עַבְרָה) may have been clipped, such that the name was preserved as bēt barā (בֵּית בַּרְה) in a few instances (Judg 7,24).

(3.b) The translators of the Old Greek (and possibly also the tradents who worked in Greek, such as Origen and Eusebius) seem to have made the same misanalysis independently, representing \*ḡarabv (written as עַרְבָה, and therefore graphically indistinct from ‘arabā in Hebrew manuscripts) without the g characteristic of LXX’s representation of original Heb. \*/ḡ/ (i.e., Βηθαβαβᾶ instead of an expected Βηθαγαβαβᾶ or the like). Text-critically speaking, metathesis of the consonants β and ρ (e.g., LXXB at Josh 18,22) can only have been compounded by the existence of so many similar names.

(4) It is unclear whether the graphic corruption of a Hebrew text, an intentional play on words, or possibly somehow a corruption of an oral tradition (?) may have yielded the tradition of John’s being one who would “prepare” (κατασκευάζω) for Jesus at a “House of Preparation” (οἶκος κατασκευῆς < \*בֵּית עַבְרָה < \*בֵּית עַבְרָה) preserved in Mk 1,2, and picked up by Origen in his *Commentary on John*.

Although appearing complicated, this schema seems to me to be the most economical way to read the textual variants that must also serve as our textual witnesses. But a nagging question remains: if the toponymic antecedent for these various geographical names lay on the western bank of the Jordan River, how is it that John 1,28 preserved a tradition of John’s ministry on the eastern bank? The answer, once again, lies in a critical study of the toponymic environment of the Levant.

Due to what Elitzur calls the “territorial nature of geographical names”<sup>(74)</sup> it is not uncommon for toponyms to be displaced *ca.* 7.0-8.5 km away from the historical location of the site<sup>(75)</sup>. In short, even

<sup>(73)</sup> R.C. STEINER, “On the Dating of Hebrew Sound Changes (\**H* > *H* and \**G* > ‘) and Greek Translations (2 Esdras and Judith)”, *JBL* 124 (2005) 229-267.

<sup>(74)</sup> ELITZUR, *Ancient Place Names*, 128; see also *ibid.*, 13, 119, etc.; and *idem*, “The Concept of Territory in the Arab Village and in Biblical Geography”, *Israel Land and Nature* 7 (1982) 146-150.

<sup>(75)</sup> AHARONI, *Land of the Bible*, 123; A.F. RAINEY, “The Toponymics of Eretz-Israel”, *BASOR* 231 (1978) 10; J.M. MILLER, “Rehoboam’s Cities of Defense and the Levitical City List”, *Archaeology and Biblical Interpretation. Essays in Memory of D. Glenn Rose* (eds. L.G. PERDUE – L.E. TOOMBS – G.L. JOHNSON) (Atlanta, GA 1987) 275; *idem*, “Site Identification: A Problem Area in Contemporary Biblical Scholarship”, *ZDPV* 99 (1983) 123-124.

assuming that no settlement named Beth Abarah ever actually existed, and that the name persisted only as a misanalyzed form of a nearby Beth ha-Arabah, the preservation of the name in this area, if proven, would serve as a check on allowing too free a reign to the placement of the Judahite-Benjaminite border. Furthermore, no matter the precise location of any of these locales, and regardless of whether *Ḥ. 'Ēn el-Ġarabe* authentically preserves the toponymic antecedent of Beth ha-Arabah and Bethabara, the very narrowly circumscribed geographical area between the land surrounding *Dēr Ḥaġla* and the area just east of the exit of the *Wādi el-Qilt* from the Judean hill country corresponds precisely to the Madaba Map's location of Bethabara, and to the testimony of the Bourdeaux Pilgrim. The identification of Byzantine Βηθαβαρᾶ with Biblical בית הערבה and perhaps בית ברה, along with that locale's geographic placement in the Jordan Valley, leaves little doubt that the name indicates the area immediately to the west and west-north-west of the *el-Maġtas/Haġla* fords. The "local tradition" of a "House of Crossing" (Βηθαβαρᾶ), regardless of whether it authentically preserves the name of an ancient settlement or is only the product of an etiological misanalysis occasioned by fords conveniently located to the east of a settlement named Beth ha-Arabah, can only refer to this southern set of fords over the Jordan River. The Gospel of John's notice that the Baptist's ministry occurred "beyond the Jordan" simply indicates the eastern regional counterpart to this territory west of the ford. It should come as no surprise that Wiefel found the names *Wādi Ġarbe* (or *W. Ġarūbe*) and *Ḥirbet Ġarbe* on the eastern bank of the Jordan attached to a valley paralleling the *W. Ḥarrār* only 3.5 km to the south of that feature<sup>(76)</sup>. Whether or not this name authentically preserves the toponym under discussion, its appearance on both sides of the Jordan River in regions roughly contiguous to one another attests to the "territorial nature of geographical names" argued for by Elitzur, and therefore to the possibility that the gospel writer was relying on reasonably accurate information in placing John's ministry "across the Jordan."

<sup>(76)</sup> WIEFEL, "Bethabara", 81; see previously F.M. ABEL, "Exploration de Sud-est de la vallée du Jourdain", *RB* 41 (1932) 78 fig. 1, and 88. One might point to the existence of a "wādi of Poplars" (נחל הערבים) in Isa 15,7 as further evidence that the ascent of Luhith (Isa 15,5; Jer 48,5) is to be located at this major ascent from the Jordan River to Livias; see HUTTON, "Mahanaim", 177 n. 68.

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The foregoing discussion of the topographic notices concerning Bethabara/Bethany in the Gospel of John in the light of the gospel writer’s redactional choices, combined with the recognition that the toponym Bethabara referred to the set of fords itself, and not necessarily to a particular location of settlement, alleviates the problem adduced by Rudolf Bultmann<sup>(77)</sup> — which became the foundational problem underlying Riesner’s search for the locale<sup>(78)</sup> — namely, that the large number of the Baptist’s followers who joined Jesus at “the place where John had been baptizing formerly” (John 10,40-42) should have left some sort of trace in the archaeological record, an assumption complicated by the absence of contemporaneous remains at the *el-Mağtas* and *Hağla* fords<sup>(79)</sup>. Through redactional means the writer of the fourth gospel accomplished a transferal of the location of John’s ministry to the region surrounding the southern Bethabara ford in order to bring his source — which originally located the Baptist’s ministry at Aenon — into conformity with the Synoptic Gospels. The lack of archaeological evidence for a pre-Byzantine settlement at the lowermost fords of the Jordan should be neither surprising nor especially problematic, at least on the basis of any standpoint reached from critical engagement with the composition history of the Gospel of John, and with historical geography.

<sup>(77)</sup> R. BULTMANN, *Das Evangelium des Johannes* (KEK; Göttingen 1941) 64-65 n. 5. The work of K. KUNDSIN (*Topologische Überlieferungsstoffe im Johannes-Evangelium* [FRLANT 22; Göttingen 1925] 20-21) is also often cited in this context, but I see no real evidence in these pages that he had problematized this issue to the extent that BULTMANN did.

<sup>(78)</sup> RIESNER, *Bethanien*, 10-12.

<sup>(79)</sup> For recent summaries of the excavation projects of the Jordanian side of the river, see R. MKHIJIAN, “John the Baptist Church Area: New Evidence Regarding the Basilica and Four Piers”, *ADAJ* 48 (2004) 239-241; R. MKHIJIAN – C. KANELLOPOULOS, “John the Baptist Church Area: Architectural Evidence”, *ADAJ* 47 (2003) 9-18; M. WAHEEB, “Mosaic Floors in the Baptism Site (Bethany Beyond the Jordan)”, *ADAJ* 49 (2005) 345-349; idem, “Recent Discoveries in Bethany Beyond the Jordan”, *ADAJ* 48 (2004) 243-248; idem, “Recent Discoveries in Bethany Beyond the Jordan in Jordan Valley”, *ADAJ* 47 (2003) 243-246, and the sources listed in those articles; see also the bibliography in RIESNER, *Bethanien*, 29 n. 66. It appears that the earliest structures found at the site are likely to be identified with the Byzantine pilgrimage site centered on the church built by Anastasius and described by Theodosius in the early 6th century (see n. 51 above).

Although this article builds upon much of the foregoing literature, its purpose is to provide a reassessment and critique of the latest argument that would move the baptismal location of the Gospel of John away from the traditionally recognized site of that event's remembrance. The argument presented here pertaining to the textual and traditional confusion of Βηθαβαρᾶ, בית הערבה, and בית ברה has been anticipated for decades (by, e.g., Lagrange, Clapp, and Wiefel), if not for centuries (e.g., Lightfoot). The article's original contribution, therefore, lies in the recognition of the potential lexical confusion that seems to be intimately intertwined in Origen's allusion (κατασκευῆ) to the verb κατασκευάζω of Mk 1,2 which, I have argued, proceeded from a tradition in which a toponymic tradition concerning a בית עברה was somehow corrupted into בית עבדה, "House of Preparation".

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#### SUMMARY

Origen selected ἐν Βηθαβαρᾶ in John 1,28 as the superior reading in his *Comm. Jo.*, an assessment challenged by modern critics. Although the text-critical data seem to indicate ἐν Βηθανία as the preferable reading, this claim may be questioned on literary and redactional grounds. Those same observations provide evidence for intentional literary commemoration of John's ministry at the Jordan. Origen's gloss of Βηθαβαρᾶ as "House of Preparation" (οἶκος κατασκευῆς) leads to an examination of Mk 1,2-3, and its lexical divergence from LXX Mal 3,1.22-23 [=MT vv. 23-24]; Isa 40,3. Mark anomalously uses the verb κατασκευάζω, the nominal counterpart of which (κατασκευῆ) renders Heb. עבדה "work, preparation" (LXX<sup>AB</sup> Exod 35,24), which is graphically similar to בית עברה. When combined with historical-geographical study of the area surrounding Jericho, these data allow us to trace the process of textual and traditional development whereby the toponym בית הערבה (Josh 15,6.61; 18,22), preserved at the modern *H. 'Ēn el-Ġarabe*, served as the toponymic antecedent of both Βηθαβαρᾶ and Beth Barah (Judg 7,24). This process of development provides additional defense for the traditional localization of John's ministry in the southern Jordan River Valley near the *el-Maġtas* and *Haġla* fords.