

“BEYOND THE JORDAN”: A PHRASE IN QUESTION

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“*Beyond the Jordan*” is a recurring biblical phrase that requires detailed study. It has relevance to locating unknown places like “*the threshing floor of Atad*” in Genesis 50:10, 11. In this reference “*beyond the Jordan*” occurs twice as an explanatory note for the position of the threshing floor.

Questions arise as to whether the geographical note carries a consistent meaning, what that usage is, whether more than one consistency may be involved, and whether there are sufficient clear usages to determine its significance in ambiguous cases.

In narrative sections, “*beyond the Jordan*” could be opposite the author, opposite the anticipated destination of the writing, or opposite the preceding event. In dialogue it could mean opposite to the speaker. Narrative or dialogue could use the term in a semi-technical way for just one side like Transjordan in more modern times. A survey of the data may determine whether any of these possibilities hold true.

Although several words in the three biblical languages involve *beyond* in their translation,¹ only prepositions belong to this study. Verbs with *beyond* in their English equivalents are verbs of motion; so “beyond” means direction rather than location. Since this inquiry deals with the “location” of what is “*beyond the Jordan*,” only prepositions appear here.

Further elimination comes from noting that עַל calls for “beyond” in its translation, but it has a temporal significance.² The Hebrew הַלְאָה and the Greek ἐπέκεινα,³ though prepositions of place, also lie outside this investigation because they never refer to the Jordan River. So, only the Hebrew עֵבֶר, the Aramaic עֵבֶר,⁴ and the Greek πέραν figure into determining what “*beyond the Jordan*” means.

The following chart lists the 105 occurrences of עֵבֶר and עֵבֶר.⁵ The translations in the King James (1611) and the American Standard (1901) appear in parallel columns.

<u>Hebrew</u> עֵבֶר	<u>King James</u>	<u>American Standard</u>
Gen. 50:10	beyond	beyond
11	"	"
Ex. 25:37	against	against
28:26	the side of	the side of
32:15	their sides	their sides
39:19	the side of	the side of
Num. 21:13	on the other side of	on the other side of
22:1	on this side	beyond
32:19	on yonder side	on the other side of

	19	on this side	on this side of
	32	" " "	beyond
	34:15	" " "	"
	35:14	" " "	"
Deut.	1:1	" " "	"
	5	" " "	"
	3:8	" " "	"
	20	beyond	"
	25	"	"
	4:41	on this side	"
	46	" " "	"
	47	" " "	"
	49	" " "	"
	11:30	on the other side	beyond
	30:13	beyond	"
	13	(go) over (the sea for us)	over
Josh.	1:14	on this side	beyond
	15	" " "	"
	2:10	on the other side	"
	5:1	on the side of	"
	7:7	on the other side	"
	9:1	on this side	"
	10	beyond	"
	12:1	on the other side	"
	7	on this side	"
	13:8	beyond	"
	27	on the other side	"
	32	" " " "	"
	14:3	" " " "	"
	17:5	" " " "	"
	18:7	beyond	"
	20:8	on the other side	"
	22:4	" " " "	"
	7	" " " "	"
	11	at <u>the passage</u> of the children	on the side that pertains to
	24:2	on the other side	beyond
	3	from the other side	"
	8	on the other side	"
	14	on the other side of	"
	15	" " " " "	"
Judg.	5:17	beyond	"
	7:25	on the other side	"
	10:8	" " " "	"
	11:18	on the other side of	on the other side of

1 Sam.	14:1	on the other side	on yonder side of
	4	on the one side	on the one side
	4	on the other side	on the other side
	40	on the one side	on the one side
	26:13	to the other side	to the other side
	31:7	on the other side of	on the other side of
	7	on the other side	" " " " "
2 Sam.	10:16	beyond	beyond
1 Kgs.	4:12	"	"
	24	on this side	on this side
	24	" " "	" " "
	24	sides	sides
	7:20	by	by
	30	at the side	at the side
	14:15	beyond	beyond
1 Chr.	6:78	And on the other side	"
	12:37	" " " " "	And on the other side of
	19:16	beyond	beyond
	26:30	on this side	"
2 Chr.	20:2	from beyond	from beyond
Ezra	8:36	on this side	beyond
Neh.	2:7	beyond	"
	9	"	"
	3:7	on this side	"
Job	1:19	from	from
Isa.	7:20	by them beyond	beyond
	9:1	beyond	"
	18:1	"	"
	47:15	to his quarter	to his quarter
Jer.	22:20	from the passages	from
	25:22	beyond	beyond
	48:28	in the side of	over
	49:32	sides thereof	every side
Eze.	1:9	straight (forward)	straight
	12	straight	"
	10:22	"	"
Zeph.	3:10	from beyond	from beyond
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(Aramaic עֲבָר)			
Ezr.	4:10	on this side	beyond
	11	" " "	"
	16	" " "	"
	17	beyond	"
	20	"	"
	5:3	on this side	"
	6	" " "	"
	6	" " "	"

6:6	beyond	"
6	"	"
8	"	"
13	on this side	"
7:21	beyond	"
25	"	"

This chart yields three observations. Most important is the variety of meanings the translators assigned to the words.⁶ Secondly, the American Standard Version favors “beyond” over interpreting references as “*this side*” or “*the other side*.” Lastly, aside from the second observation, both translations generally render each reference alike. The American Standard either “revised” the King James only when necessary or the translators independently reached the same conclusions in most translations.

To demonstrate the flexibility of עֵבֶר, the previous chart includes those passages where the word does not signify position. The list below shows only the locative usages of the preposition. The last column notes direction indicators found in some references.

<u>Scripture</u>	<u>Place Name</u>	<u>Special Direction Indicator</u>
Gen. 50:10	the Jordan	
11	" "	
Num. 21:13	the Arnon	
22:1	the Jordan	
32:19	" "	
19	" "	eastward
32	" "	
34:15	" "	eastward, toward the sunrising
35:14	" "	
Deut. 1:1	" "	
5	" "	
3:8	" "	
20	" "	
25	" "	
4:41	" "	toward the sunrising
46	" "	
47	" "	toward the sunrising
49	" "	eastward
11:30	" "	behind the way of the going down of the sun
30:13	the sea	
13	" "	
Josh. 1:14	the Jordan	
15	" "	toward the sunrising

	2:10	" "	
	5:1	" "	westward
	7:7	" "	
	9:1	" "	
	10	" "	
	12:1	" "	toward the sunrising
	7	" "	westward
	13:8	" "	eastward
	27	" "	"
	32	" "	"
	14:3	" "	
	17:5	" "	
	18:7	" "	eastward
	20:8	" "	"
	22:4	" "	
	7	" "	westward
	24:2	the flood	
	3	" "	
	8	the Jordan	
	14	the flood	
	15	" "	
Judg.	5:17	the Jordan	
	7:5	" "	
	10:8	" "	
	11:18	the Arnon	
1 Kgs.	4:12	Jokmeam	
	24	the river	
	24	" "	
	14:15	" "	
1 Chr.	6:78	the Jordan	on the east side of the Jordan
	12:37	" "	
	19:16	the river	
	26:30	the Jordan	
2 Chr.	20:2	the sea	
Ezra	4:10	the river	
	11	the river	
	16	" "	
	17	" "	
	20	" "	
	5:3	" "	
	6	" "	
	6	" "	
	6:6	" "	
	6	" "	
	8	" "	
	13	" "	

	7:21	" "
	25	" "
	8:36	" "
Neh.	2:7	the river
	9	" "
	3:7	" "
Job	1:19	the wilderness
Isa.	2:20	the river
	9:1	the Jordan
	18:1	the rivers of Ethiopia
Jer.	25:22	the sea
Zeph.	3:10	the rivers of Ethiopia

This analysis provides the following conclusions. First, “*beyond the Jordan*” may refer to territories on the east or west side of El Ghor. Numbers 34:15 refers to Transjordan; Deuteronomy 11:30 designates the western side. So, in the Old Testament עֲבֶר־הַיַּרְדֵּן is not a quasi-technical term for one side.

Secondly, the phrase does not speak relative to the location of the writer or reader. Deuteronomy 4:41 speaks of “*beyond the Jordan*” toward the East; 11:30 uses it for territory west of Palestine. The same is true of Joshua 1:15 and 5:1, and 1 Chronicles 6:78 and 26:30. In fact, every book with more than three usages has references to both sides.

The presence of special direction indicators⁷ may imply that the term is ambiguous. Of the forty-four times “*beyond the Jordan*” occurs, eighteen add direction notes. However, Hebrew tends to be redundant, as evidenced in Numbers 34:15: “*eastward, toward the sunrising.*” Nevertheless, these cases should be kept in mind.

Besides the fact that עֲבֶר־הַיַּרְדֵּן can label either side of the Jordan (and so is not quasi-technical or opposite to the writer or reader), Isaiah 18:1 speaks of “*the land . . . beyond the rivers of Ethiopia*”; hence, עֲבֶר may have an east-west or north-south orientation, depending on some viewpoint.

“*Beyond the Jordan*” could be governed by considerations within the writing itself. The viewpoint of persons in the text might inform a pattern of usage because a writer can present events through their eyes. The writings can be divided between narrative and dialogue. The following summary organizes the forty-four occurrences of עֲבֶר־הַיַּרְדֵּן to determine whether the expression indicates the location of events in the narrative and whether the speakers in dialogue reflect their position by how they employ the phrase.

Scripture ⁸	<u>W.</u>	<u>E.</u>	<u>NSS</u>	<u>NOS</u>	<u>DSS</u>	<u>DOS</u>
Gen. 50:10	-?- - - - -	-?- - - - -	-?- - - - -	-?- - - - -	-?- - - - -	-?- - - - -
11	?- - - - -	?- - - - -	?- - - - -	?- - - - -	?- - - - -	?- - - - -

Num.	22:1	x - - - - - x
	32:19	x - - - - - x
	19	(x) - - - - - x
	32	x - - - - - x
	34:15	(x) - - - - - x
	35:14	x - - - - - x
Deut.	1:1	x - - - - - x
	5	x - - - - - x
	3:8	x - - - - - x
	20	x - - - - - x
	25	x - - - - - x
	4:41	(x) - - - - - x
	46	x - - - - - x
	47	(x) - - - - - x
	49	(x) - - - - - x
	11:30	(x) - - - - - x
Joshua	1:14	x - - - - - x
	15	(x) - - - - - x
	2:10	x - - - - - x
	5:1	(x) - - - - - x
	7:7	x - - - - - x
	9:1	x - - - - - x
	10	x - - - - - x
	12:1	(x) - - - - - x
	7	(x) - - - - - x
	13:8	(x) - - - - - x
	27	(x) - - - - - x
	32	(x) - - - - - x
	14:3	x - - - - - x
	17:5	x - - - - - x
	18:7	(x) - - - - - x
	20:8	(x) - - - - - x
	22:4	x - - - - - x
	7	(x) - - - - - x
	24:8	x - - - - - x
Judges	5:17	x - - - - - x
	7:25	? - - - - - x
	10:8	x - - - - - x
1 Chr.	6:78	(x) - - - - - x
	12:37	x - - - - - x
	26:30	(x) - - - - - x
Isaiah	9:1	x - - - - - x

This chart shows twenty-six occurrences of the phrase in narrative sections and eighteen in dialogue. In the narrative portions, twelve times the phrase refers to the side opposite the events recorded and twelve times to the same side, with two uncertain examples. There is

also no uniformity in the dialogue sections: seven designate the same side as the speaker and ten designate the opposite side, with one unclear example. Nothing evidently feels incongruous about Moses' standing on the east side of the Jordan and saying of Bashan and Gilead, ". . . *the two tribes and the half-tribe have received their inheritance beyond the Jordan at Jericho eastward, toward the sunrising*" (Numbers 34:15; American Standard Version). Most striking is Numbers 32:19, where the Reubenites, Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh tell Moses, ". . . *we will not inherit with them beyond Jordan, and forward; because our inheritance has fallen to us beyond Jordan eastward.*"⁹ Here the term is used in the same verse to indicate the west side then the east side.

עֲבֶר־הַיַּרְדֵּן is used for both sides, and so is not quasi-technical nor spoken from the viewpoint of the reader or writer. It occurs in both dialogue and narrative for the opposite side as well as the same side. Consequently, "*beyond the Jordan*" is not the prime meaning of this phrase. In keeping with this fact, Gesenius gives "region beyond" as the meaning of עֲבֶר, because the word is first considered a masculine noun, which when put in the construct becomes "*region of the Jordan,*" or "*region of the Arnon.*" The word becomes a preposition meaning "*at, by, near, around.*" The cognate Hebrew verb עָבַר means "to cross over," being related to the Arabic root meaning "*to cross a river.*" All the evidence from related words and popular usage indicates that "near" or "beside"—rather than "beyond"—is the prime value of the word.

The New Testament phrase πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου does show consistent usage. It always designates the eastern side¹⁰ except in Matthew 4:15, which quotes Isaiah 9:1 according to the Septuagint.

Conclusion

עֲבֶר־הַיַּרְדֵּן is a recurrent Old Testament expression commonly translated "beyond," but meaning something closer to "near" or "*beside the Jordan.*" It identifies the territory as related to the Jordan River. The phrase designates both sides of the Jordan in narrative and dialogue. The corresponding New Testament phrase uniformly means Transjordan except in Matthew 4:15, which quotes the Greek translation of Isaiah 9:1

¹In the Authorized Version, there are three Hebrew prepositions (עַל, עֲבֶר, and הַלְאָה) one Hebrew verb (עָבַר, translated "*pass beyond*" in Judges 3:26; Numbers 22:18, and 20:36 from the Hiphil infinitive), one Aramaic preposition (עֲבֶר), and two Greek prepositions of the New Testament (ἐπέκεινα and πέραν), besides some Greek verbs that have "beyond" in their translation.

²Leviticus 15:25

³Ἐπέκεινα appears only in Acts 7:43, where Stephen quotes Amos 5:27 about going into captivity “*beyond Babylon*” (New Testament), or “*beyond Damascus*” (Old Testament). הַלְאָה occurs fifteen times in the Old testament (including Amos 5:27).

⁴עֲבַר in Hebrew is a cognate of the Aramaic עֲבַר.

⁵All come from the Aramaic portion of Ezra and appear together at the end of the list.

⁶The King James Version gives eleven meanings: beyond, over, against, by, straight, quarter, (the) side(s), one side, this side, other (or yonder) side, the passage(s). In the American Standard Version, ten different translations occur: beyond, over, against, by, straight, quarter, (the) side(s), one side, this side, other (or yonder) side. Modern versions exhibit a similar variety of translations for the word.

⁷The added phrases are *eastward toward the sun rising; eastward, toward the sun rising; westward; and behind the way of the going down of the sun.*

⁸Column one lists all the passages where עֲבַר-הַיַּרְדֵּן occurs. Columns two and three, “W” and “E,” indicate the side of the Jordan where the content of the text occurs. (Parentheses are placed around the x’s where special direction indicators are found.) “NSS” and “NOS” indicate respectively whether the events of the Narrative are on the Same Side as what “*beyond the Jordan*” refers to or whether they are on the Opposite Side. “DSS” and “DOS” designate Dialogue in which the phrase refers to the Same Side as the speaker or the Opposite Side.

⁹Cp. 1 Samuel 14:4, 40.

¹⁰Matthew 4:15, 25; 19:1; Mark 3:8; 10:1; John 1:28; 3:26