

# The Book of the Wars of the Lord (Num. 21:14–20): Philology and Hydrology, Geography and Ethnography

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In memory of Louis and Jennie Weiss ל"צ,  
the chieftain and noblewoman who dug the  
well from which I and my extended family  
have drawn for five generations.

Num. 21:14 contains one of the most enigmatic phrases in the Pentateuch: אֶת־יְהוָה בְּסוּפָהּ. The usual interpretations of אֶת turn the phrase into gibberish because they require the presence of a verb, which is nowhere to be found. Some scholars have supplied an understood verb; others have resorted to emendation. A better solution is available: אֶת in our passage is *a verb masquerading as a preposition*. It is easily construed, without the slightest change, as an archaic apocopated/bilateral imperative of י-ת-א, meaning “come!”

This construal of אֶת transforms our understanding of Num. 21:14–20 in many ways. For example, it reveals that אֶת־יְהוָה בְּסוּפָהּ מִלְחַמַּת הַיָּבֵה, “On account of that, it is said in the Book of the Wars of the Lord, ‘Come to (Mount) Waheb,’” bears a striking resemblance to אֶת־יְהוָה בְּסוּפָהּ מִלְחַמַּת הַיָּבֵה, “On account of that, the bards say, ‘Come to Heshbon,’” thirteen verses later. More generally, the new construal, taken together with some pertinent geographic, ethnographic, and hydrologic facts, makes possible a new, more coherent reading of the entire passage.

## INTRODUCTION

Numbers 21 contains an excerpt from the “Book of the Wars of the Lord” (henceforth, the/our excerpt). Many scholars believe that the excerpt consists of “only a few damaged lines”<sup>1</sup> (viz., vv. 14b–15), from which “even the main verb has disappeared,”<sup>2</sup> and that it is “no longer intelligible to us.”<sup>3</sup>

In this study, I shall argue that the aforementioned belief is incorrect. The excerpt turns out to be surprisingly intelligible, once it is recognized that 1) v. 14b, *without any consonantal or vocalic change, has verbs hiding in plain sight*; 2) those verbs form clauses whose meaning is elucidated by numerous parallels, in the same chapter and elsewhere; and 3) the excerpt extends to v. 20:

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1. Eryl W. Davies, *Numbers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 220.
2. R. C. Dentan, “Wars of the Lord, Book of the,” *IDB*, 805.
3. Arnold B. Ehrlich, *Randglossen zur Hebräischen Bibel* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1908–1914), 2: 190.

[14] עַל־כֵּן יֹאמֶר בְּסֵפֶר מִלְחַמַת ה' אֶת־וְהֵב בְּסוּפָהּ וְאֶת־הַנְּחָלִים אֲרֹנוֹן:  
 [15] וְאֶשְׂד הַנְּחָלִים  
 אֲשֶׁר נָטָה לְשִׁבַת עַר וְנִשְׁעַן לְגִבּוֹל מוֹאָב:  
 [16] וּמִשָּׁם בְּאֵרָה  
 הוּא הַבְּאֵר אֲשֶׁר אָמַר ה' לְמֹשֶׁה  
 אֲסֹף אֶת־הָעַם וְאֶתְנֶנָּה לָהֶם מַיִם:  
 [17] אִזּוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת  
 עָלֵי בְּאֵר עֵנוֹלָה:  
 [18] בְּאֵר חֲפְרוּהָ שָׂרִים כְּרוּהָ נְדִיבֵי הָעַם  
 בְּמַחֲזֵק בְּמִשְׁעֵנֵיהֶם וּמִמְדָּבָר מַתָּנָה:  
 [19] וּמִמַּתָּנָה נַחְלִיאֵל וּמִנַּחְלִיאֵל בְּמוֹת:  
 [20] וּמִבְּמוֹת הַגֵּיא אֲשֶׁר בְּשִׂדֵּה מוֹאָב  
 רֹאשׁ הַפִּסְגָּה וְנִשְׁקָפָה עַל־פְּנֵי הַיְשִׁימֹן:

I shall further argue that a close reading of this longer passage reveals that it is a poetic exhortation to visit inspiring sites, most of them 1) located in and around the Desert of Kedemoth and the Steppes of Moab; and 2) related to the Lord's wars with Transjordanian rulers. The following translation, containing some explanatory interpolations in parentheses (especially in v. 14), can serve as an introduction to the proposed reading:

- [14] On account of that, it is said in the Book of the Wars of the Lord:  
 (If you wish to be inspired by the wonders that Israel experienced during the period of conflict with Sihon, Og, Balak, and the five Midianite rulers,) come to (Mt.) Waheb (in the Desert of Kedemoth) during a storm, and come to the Arnon's (tributary) wadis (surrounding that mountain),  
 [15] and to the confluence of those wadis (at that mountain), (the confluence) that turns toward the settled area of Ar and hugs (lit. leans against) the (northern) border of Moab.  
 [16] And from there, (the confluence at Mt. Waheb, come) to the/a well—the well about which the Lord said to Moses,  
 “Assemble the people that I may give them water.”  
 [17] It was on that occasion that Israel sang this song:  
 “Spring up, O well! Sing (O Israel) to/of it!  
 [18] The well that the chieftains dug,  
 that the nobles of the people excavated,  
 with (only) a scepter, with their own staffs—  
 a gift (*mattanah*) from the desert.”  
 [19] And from (that well, named) Mattanah,  
 (come) to Nahaliel (“mighty canyons”),  
 and from Nahaliel, (come) to Bamoth(-baal),  
 [20] and from Bamoth(-baal),  
 (come) to the valley (in front of Baal's temple on Mt. Peor)  
 in the open country of Moab,  
 (and) to the top of Pisgah,  
 overlooking the wasteland.

## THE PHILOLOGICAL PROBLEM AND PREVIOUS SOLUTIONS

The first one and a half verses of the excerpt, Num. 21:14b–15, have defied the best efforts of leading text critics. George Buchanan Gray described them as “an obscure fragment beginning in the middle of one sentence and breaking off in the middle of the next.”<sup>4</sup> W. F. Albright referred to them as a “fragment . . . which cannot be reconstructed.”<sup>5</sup> Martin Noth concluded that “the quotation has been transmitted in such a fragmentary and obviously, in part, incorrect fashion that it defies all explanation.”<sup>6</sup> More recently, Horst Seebass has conceded that “because of the state of the text, a universally satisfactory solution is hardly to be found,”<sup>7</sup> adding that “whoever raises to a dogma (the view of) MT as the only admissible text will stay with its incomprehensible wording.”<sup>8</sup>

Not surprisingly, the inability of scholars to make sense of Num. 21:14–15 has led to skepticism about the surrounding verses as well. J. Maxwell Miller describes Num. 21:10–20 as a passage “which commentators and biblical cartographers have struggled with for years on the mistaken assumption that it is supposed to make geographical sense. But it simply does not . . .”<sup>9</sup> Christian Frevel asks whether Num. 21:10–20 is a “geographical and redactional hodgepodge” and answers in the affirmative.<sup>10</sup>

Let us examine this infamous crux more closely. The quotation from the Book of the Wars of the Lord begins with one of the most enigmatic phrases in the Pentateuch: אֶת־וְהֵב בְּסוּפֵהָ (Num. 21:14). The first word in this phrase, אֶת, looks like the so-called “accusative marker” (i.e., the preposition used to mark definite direct objects),<sup>11</sup> and that is the way most exegetes have understood it. The problem is that this interpretation of אֶת seems to turn the phrase into gibberish because “Waheb and the valleys are in the accusative case and require a verb to govern them.”<sup>12</sup>

According to Arnold Ehrlich, there is also a secondary problem: the direct object marker “occurs extremely rarely elsewhere in poetry.”<sup>13</sup> Ehrlich’s claim is significant, even if it is overstated. The direct object marker אֶת is one of the so-called “prose particles,” which are used sparingly in poetry, especially in the poetry of the Pentateuch and the Former Prophets.<sup>14</sup>

4. George Buchanan Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Numbers* (New York: Scribner, 1903), 285.

5. William F. Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968), 44.

6. Martin Noth, *Numbers: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), 160.

7. Horst Seebass, *Numeri* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1993–2007), 2: 330.

8. *Ibid.*, 335.

9. J. Maxwell Miller, “The Israelite Journey through (around) Moab and Moabite Toponymy,” *JBL* 108 (1989): 585.

10. Christian Frevel, “Understanding the Pentateuch by Structuring the Desert: Numbers 21 as a Compositional Joint,” in *The Land of Israel in Bible, History, and Theology: Studies in Honour of Ed Noort*, ed. Jacques van Ruiten and J. Cornelis de Vos (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 131–32.

11. As recognized by many linguists, the direct object marker is a preposition. However, none of the arguments presented below depends on this classification.

12. George Adam Smith, *The Early Poetry of Israel in Its Physical and Social Origins* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1912), 62. So too August Dillmann, *Numeri, Deuteronomium und Josua* (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1886), 123; Hermann L. Strack, *Die Bücher Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, und Numeri* (Munich: Beck, 1894), 427; N. H. Tur-Sinai, “ספר מלחמות ה'” בידי כותב התורה? *BIES* 24 (1960): 146; and Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 407 n. 8.

13. Ehrlich, *Randglossen*, 2: 190; cf. Duane L. Christensen, “Num. 21:14–15 and the Book of the Wars of Yahweh,” *CBQ* 36 (1974): 359 n. 4.

14. See David Noel Freedman, “Prose Particles in the Poetry of the Primary History,” in *Biblical and Related Studies Presented to Samuel Iwry*, ed. Ann Kort and Scott Morschauer (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1985), 49–62.

A few medieval Jewish exegetes and modern scholars have believed that the context calls for the *other* preposition אָתְּ, the one that means “with” when governing a personal name and “next to” when governing a place name.<sup>15</sup> This preposition, sometimes called *comitative* (= expressing accompaniment), is a homonym of the direct object marker.<sup>16</sup> Interpreting our אָתְּ as comitative eliminates the secondary problem, but not the primary one. We are still dealing with a sentence fragment in search of a verb. In that respect, the only difference between the two prepositional interpretations of אָתְּ is whether the missing verb is transitive or intransitive.

One noteworthy response to this problem appears in an eleventh-century Hebrew commentary from Castoria, the *Leqah Tov* of Tobias b. Eliezer: “אָתְּ-וְהֵב—he came and gave (אתא ויהב): he came and gave (בא ונתן) signs and wonders.”<sup>17</sup> This comment appears to suggest that both אָתְּ and הֵב are verbs—perfects (3ms) of roots known primarily from Aramaic but attested in Biblical Hebrew poetry as well. Tobias b. Eliezer was preceded by at least one exegete in his interpretation of הֵב, but I know of no other Jewish exegete—before or after him—who took אָתְּ as a verb.<sup>18</sup> It was not until 900 years later that Duane Christensen hit upon a similar solution, revocalizing אָתְּ (but not הֵב) as a verb in the perfect, viz., אָתְּ.<sup>20</sup> His treatment of אָתְּ was initially welcomed by scholars, despite the additional emendations that it entailed.<sup>21</sup> In recent decades, however, those emendations have been criticized as excessive and unnecessary.<sup>22</sup>

#### אָתְּ: A NEW SUGGESTION

My own interpretation agrees with these earlier interpretations (of which I was not initially aware) in taking אָתְּ as a verb from the poetic Hebrew root א-ת-י, “come.” However, I see no reason to take אָתְּ as a perfect, against the received vocalization. I submit that אָתְּ in

15. See, for example, Meyuḥas b. Elija, פירוש על ספר במדבר, ed. Shlomo Freilich (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1977), 141; Isaac Abarbanel, פירוש התורה לרבינו יצחק אבארבנאל, ed. A. Shotland and Y. Shaviv (Jerusalem: Chorev, 1997–2008), 4: 183 bottom; N. H. Tur-Sinai, ספר מלחמות ה', 147–48; idem, פשוטו של מקרא (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1962–1968), 1: 168; and Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 21–36* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 93–94.

16. Thus, אָתְּ-אֶתְּ אֶתְּ אֶתְּ (Num. 8:26) can mean either “he shall serve with his brothers” or “he shall serve his brothers,” and, indeed, both interpretations are found in the targums. Note that the two prepositions are homonymous only when they are unsuffixed. With suffixes, there is normally a contrast between accusative אֶתְּ-אֶתְּ and comitative אֶתְּ-אֶתְּ.

17. Tobias b. Eliezer, מדרש לקח טוב המכונה פסיקתא זוטרתא על חמשה חומשי תורה (Vilna, 1884), 248 ll. 2–3.

18. See below.

19. According to some commentaries on Numbers Rabba, the latter equates אָתְּ in our verse with the noun אֶתְּ, “sign”; see מדרש רבה עם כל המפרשים in אמרי ישר and חידושי הרש”ש (Jerusalem: Vagshal, 2001), 5: 472 s.v. שעשה. I am indebted to S. Z. Leiman for these references.

20. Christensen, “Num. 21:14–15,” 359–60.

21. Manfred Weippert, “The Israelite ‘Conquest’ and the Evidence from Transjordan,” in *Symposia Celebrating the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the Founding of the American Schools of Oriental Research (1900–1975)*, ed. Frank M. Cross (Cambridge, MA: ASOR, 1979), 17; Ernst A. Knauf, “והב – Num. 21, 14,” *BN* 13 (1980): 35–36; idem, *Untersuchungen zur Geschichte Palästinas und Nordarabiens am Ende des 2. Jahrtausends v. Chr.* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1988), 92; Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 177. See also Seebass (*Numeri*, 2: 329, 331), who emends אֶתְּ to a different form of א-ת-י, viz., יאת.

22. Levine, *Numbers 21–36*, 93: “[Christensen’s] interpretation required him to alter the consonantal text to an extent that exceeds the usual limits. It is as if he forced this brief poetic excerpt into an interpretive mold”; Michael D. Oblath, *The Exodus Itinerary Sites* (New York: Lang, 2004), 102; Detlef Jericke, “Sufa,” in *Ortsangaben der Bibel* (2017–2019), <https://www.odw.bibelwissenschaft.de/ortsnamen/ortsname.php?n=414>.

our excerpt is quite naturally construed—without the slightest change in spelling or vocalization—as an apocopated or biliteral<sup>23</sup> imperative of א-ת-י, “come.”

This is an archaic form, belonging to the poetic dialect of Hebrew. Its closest relatives are 1) the imperfect תֵּאָתֶה, “it shall come” (Mic. 4:8); 2) the converted apocopated/biliteral imperfect וַיָּאֵת, “and he has come” (Isa. 41:25);<sup>24</sup> and 3) the Arabic conjoined masc. sing. imperative form فَاتِ *fa-ti*, “and come.”<sup>25</sup> The relationship between אָת and וַיָּאֵת is essentially the same as that between the apocopated/biliteral imperative forms הָעֵל, הָךְ, הָךְ, הָךְ, and הָךְ (2 Sam. 13:5)<sup>26</sup> and the apocopated/biliteral converted imperfect forms וַיֵּעַל, וַיֵּצֵא, וַיֵּצֵא, and וַיֵּתֵן, respectively. We may note that the apocopated/biliteral imperative form הָעֵל is attested in Num. 20:25, only eighteen verses before what I am arguing is the apocopated/biliteral imperative form אָת.

My claim is *not* that אָת was the *only* imperative of א-ת-י in BH. It may well have coexisted with an unapocopated imperative form, אָתָה\* (or אָתָה\*), just as the apocopated imperative forms וַיָּצוּ, וַיָּלַט, וַיָּהָךְ, and וַיָּהָךְ coexisted with the unapocopated imperative forms וַיָּצוּהוּ, וַיָּלְלוּהוּ, וַיָּהָךְהוּ, and וַיָּהָךְהוּ. However, it must be stressed that *no unapocopated singular imperative form is attested* for א-ת-י in the Bible.

As for the vowel of אָת, it is precisely what one would expect in an imperative of a P-IIIy root, judging from the (poetic) trilateral plural imperative אָתִי, “come!” (Isa. 21:12, 56:9, 12),<sup>27</sup> and the biliteral plural imperative אָפּוּ, “bake!” (Exod. 16:23). In a stressed syllable, the apocopated/biliteral singular would have been אָת, with a *šere*. In our verse, however, the imperative is unstressed, pronounced together with the following word (proclitic), as indicated by the *maqef* in אָת־. In the latter, we find the underlying *šere* shortened and lowered to *segol*, as is usual in a closed unstressed syllable. This alternation is well attested in all grammatical categories, including imperative forms that resemble the imperative אָת\* ~ אָת־. An example involving a biliteral imperative is תֵּן כְּבוֹד (Ps. 115:1) ~ וְתֵן-וֹרֵעַ (Gen. 47:19). An example involving a biliteral imperative of a verb of motion is לָךְ-רֹד/בֹּא ~ לָךְ.

23. It is apocopated (shortened through deletion of a final vowel) from a *synchronic* perspective. Diachronically, however, it may be just the opposite: a survival from a pre-Hebrew biliteral (i.e., biconsonantal) root \**-t* that was later “trilateralized.” For other examples of this diachronic process, see Richard C. Steiner, “Ancient Hebrew,” in *The Semitic Languages*, ed. Robert Hetzron (London: Routledge, 1997), 155–56.

24. The form וַיָּאֵת is derived from וַיָּאֵת\* (cf. תֵּאָתֶה and perhaps, as suggested by an anonymous reader, וַיָּאֵת). I suggest that the vowel was shortened in a closed syllable (cf. וַיָּשֶׁם, etc.) and then lowered to *a* by Philippi’s law (cf. וַיָּנַפֵּשׁ, וַיָּנַדֵּם, etc.).

25. See William Wright, et al., *A Grammar of the Arabic Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1896–1898), 1: 74. The short final *i* preserved in the Arabic form, like all final short high vowels, would have been lost in Hebrew.

26. Note that these examples, like others that come to mind, are from the derived stems. In BH *prose*, IIIy *qal* verbs are not attested with an apocopated/biliteral imperative, but, as noted, we are dealing here with the archaic poetic dialect of BH. It is also possible that the exceptional behavior of א-ת-י is related to the fact that it is doubly weak: P as well as IIIy. Contrast the syllable structure of וַיָּאֵת and תֵּאָתֶה—both with quiescent *aleph*—with that of, say, תֵּשֶׁבֶת and תֵּשֶׁבֶת.

27. That the Aramaic cognate of this imperative had a similar first vowel can be deduced from the use of *matres lectionis* in Late Aramaic dialects. For the Galilean Aramaic imperatives אֵיתָא (2ms) and אֵיתוֹן (2mpl), see Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the Byzantine Period*, 3rd ed. (Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan Univ. Press, 2017), 58b s.v. אֵתִי. For the Jewish Babylonian Aramaic imperative אֵיתוּ in b. Ta’anit 23b, see idem, *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Periods* (Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan Univ. Press, 2002), 176a s.v. אֵתִי. See also Matthew Morgenstern, *האורמית הבבלית היהודית בתשובות הגאונים* (PhD diss., Hebrew Univ., 2002), 351: אֵיתֵיהוּ. For cuneiform *i-ta(-a)*, rendering the Aramaic imperative, see Klaus Beyer, *Die aramäischen Texte vom Toten Meer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984–), 1: 525 s.v. אֵתִי and the literature cited there.



from *ל-ד-ע*. He takes *אֶת־נְהַב בְּסוּפָהּ* to mean that the Moabite king found himself (“was placed”) in the midst of a devastating “storm” when the Amorites attacked.<sup>35</sup>

A new approach to *נְהַב* was adopted in the twelfth century by Abraham Ibn Ezra. The latter accepted Jonah Ibn Janāh’s view of *נְהַב* as a toponym but went further, pointing to its initial *waw* as evidence of non-Hebraic origin. In the eighteenth century, Jean Le Clerc (Clericus) went even further, suggesting that *נְהַב* was the name used by local Arabs for the place known to the Israelites as *מְתַנָּה*.<sup>36</sup> Samuel Lee accepted Le Clerc’s suggestion, adding: “In the Kāmoos we have *Wahbin*, given as the name of a place, and, *Mawhabah*, as the name of a fortress in *Sena*: whence it should seem that it was not unusual to give such names to places.”<sup>37</sup> Franz Delitzsch, by contrast, rejected Le Clerc’s identification of *נְהַב* with *מְתַנָּה*. In his view, *נְהַב* must have meant “the giving, perhaps generous, willingly bestowing place.”<sup>38</sup> This gloss, presumably pointing to an *active participle*, eliminated any basis for identifying *נְהַב* with *מְתַנָּה*. G. R. Driver took this further: “*Wāhēb* [the Moabite name of the *אֲשֶׁר*, “watershed,”] is simply the Arab. *wāhibu(n)* ‘giver’ ... being so called as the source giving or providing the waters of the Arnon; so *mauhabatu(n)* ‘gift’ from the same root means also ‘small bog; ditch on a mountain where water lingers.’ Such an Arabism is nothing surprising in the Moabite dialect.”<sup>39</sup>

In a short encyclopedia entry, S. E. Loewenstamm compared *נְהַב* with personal names and place names containing the root *w-h-b* in Arabic, as Samuel Lee had done earlier. Thanks to the work of Ryckmans, he was able to add Epigraphic South Arabian names as well. These names led him to suggest that *נְהַב* is a place name derived from the name of a person or tribe.<sup>40</sup> Not long afterwards, Ernst Knauf published a short article presenting similar evidence.<sup>41</sup> He concluded that if Masoretic *נְהַב* is to be retained and interpreted as the name of a place or person, Arabs must have been involved in the events surrounding the Arnon toward the end of the second millennium BCE.<sup>42</sup> Knauf later returned to this topic briefly, adding that *Wahb* is attested as a personal name already in two cuneiform transcriptions: *ṁÛ-a-bu* (Esarhaddon) and *ṁÛ-ma-aḫ-bu*.<sup>43</sup> Against virtually all of his predecessors in the medieval and modern

35. See Joseph Bekhor Shor, *פירושי רבי יוסף בכור שור על התורה*, ed. Yeshoshafat Nevo (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1994), 280 to Num. 21:14. His gloss of *אתהבה* with *ניתן* is excellent for his purpose, since *ניתן* can mean “was placed” as well as “was given.” Much of his discussion appears virtually verbatim in later exegetical works from Northern France; see also David Qimḥi, *ספר השרשים* (Berlin: Bethge, 1847), 84a s.v. *נְהַב*.

36. Jean Le Clerc, *Mosis prophetae libri quatuor, Exodus, Leviticus, Numeri, et Deuteronomium ex translatione Joannis Clerici* (Amsterdam: Schelte, 1710), 417. For others who asserted that the etymological meaning of the toponym *נְהַב*, like that of the toponym *מְתַנָּה* (Num. 21:19), is “gift” and concluded that the two toponyms refer to the same place, see, in the following century, Jakob Z. Meklenburg, *הכתב והקבלה*, 5th ed. (Nuremberg: Bulka, 1924), 4: 33 s.v. *מְתַנָּה*; and Malbim (Meir Loeb b. Jehiel Michael), *התורה והמצוה* (Jerusalem: Pardes, 1956), 1330 s.v. *אֶת־נְהַב*.

37. Samuel Lee, *A Lexicon, Hebrew, Chaldee, and English* (London: Bohn, 1844), 165 s.v. *נְהַב*.

38. Franz Delitzsch, “Urmossaisches im Pentateuch: IV. Das Citat aus dem Kriegsbuch Num. XXI, 14. 15,” *ZKWL* 3 (1882): 340.

39. G. R. Driver, “Geographical Problems,” *EI* 5 (1958): 16\*.

40. S. E. Loewenstamm, *נְהַב*, in *Enc. Miqr.* 2: col. 873.

41. Knauf, “*נהב*,” 35–40.

42. *Ibid.*, 40.

43. Knauf, *Midian*, 92, citing Ran Zadok, “Arabians in Mesopotamia during the Late-Assyrian, Chaldean, Achæmenian and Hellenistic Periods Chiefly According to Cuneiform Sources,” *ZDMG* 131 (1981): 72 (see also pp. 45, 46, 53, and 71); and Israel Eph’al, *The Ancient Arabs* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1982), 128–29. Cuneiform *u-m(V)* is well attested as a Babylonian (NB and LB) rendering of foreign [w] and [v]; see, for example, A. C. V. M. Bongenaar and B. J. J. Haring, “Egyptians in Neo-Babylonian Sippar,” *JCS* 46 (1994): 67–68; Ran Zadok, “Iranian Names in Late Babylonian Documents,” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 17 (1975): 245–47; and Jonas C. Greenfield and Bezalel Porten, *The Bisitun Inscription of Darius the Great: Aramaic Version* (London: Lund Humphries, 1982), 58–59. The reason for

periods, Knauf concluded this time that נְהַב in Num. 21:14 is the name of a *person*—not a *place*—with אֶת־נְהַב בְּסוּפָה reflecting an original *ʿatā Wahbu bi-sūpati*, “Wahb brought a storm wind.”<sup>44</sup>

In my view, the conclusion offered in Knauf’s later discussion represents a step backward. It does not give sufficient weight to a piece of evidence that supports earlier scholars—evidence that he himself cites in a footnote in his earlier study. There he mentions that al-Bakrī’s Arabic geographical dictionary gives *Wāhib* as the name of a mountain located in the territory of the Banū Sulaym tribe (*huwa jabalun li-banī sulaym*).<sup>45</sup> This datum is quite significant because, if נְהַב is the Hebrew rendering of an Ancient North Arabian (ANA) form, that form, as recognized by Delitzsch and Driver, is the participle *wāhib* or *wāheb* rather than the noun *wahb*.<sup>46</sup>

In light of the above, I suggest that נְהַב is the name of a mountain. That is not to say that واهب in the territory of the Banū Sulaym tribe and נְהַב are the same mountain. My suggestion, rather, is that *wāhib* (literally, “giver, donor”) may have been an ANA term for a desert mountain providing abundant water for human consumption and runoff agriculture, a term that turned into the *name* of a mountain in at least two locales.<sup>47</sup> In support of this conjecture, I would note that Arabic *mawhiba/mawhaba*, a noun whose basic meaning is “gift,” has a number of derived meanings connected with rain and rainwater, including “a small pool of water left by a torrent” and “a small hollow or cavity in a mountain, in which water stagnates.”<sup>48</sup>

### סוּפָה

This noun was controversial in the Middle Ages, some exegetes understanding it as a place name and others taking it to be a common noun meaning “storm.” The latter view is the one that prevails in modern scholarship, and it is the one assumed here. The audience is urged to come to Mt. Waheb in a storm in order to comprehend some of what Israel experienced there. We are perhaps to assume that, prior to the outbreak of hostilities, the Lord came to Mt. Waheb in a torrential storm. Many exegetes, medieval and modern, cite בְּסוּפָה וּבְשַׁעֲרָה דְרָכּוֹ ה', “the Lord’s way is in storm and tempest” (Nah. 1:3), as a parallel. One might also cite ה' בָּאֵשׁ יָבוֹא וְכַסּוּפָה מְרַכְבְּתָיו ה', “the Lord will come in fire; like a storm, (in) his chariots” (Isa. 66:15).<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, the phrase כַּסּוּפָה יֵאָתֶה, “will come like a storm”

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this rendering is, no doubt, that intervocalic Akkadian *m* was realized as [w] in Babylonia—a realization reflected in Akkadian loanwords in Aramaic and Hebrew as well; see Stephen A. Kaufman, *The Akkadian Influences on Aramaic* (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1974), 143.

44. Knauf, *Midian*, 92. This rendering assigns a distinctly Arabic meaning, “brought,” to *ʿatā bi-*.

45. Abū ‘Ubayd ‘Abdallāh al-Bakrī, *Kitāb Muḥjam mā (i)staḥjam*, ed. Ferdinand Wüstenfeld (Göttingen: Dietrich, 1876–77), 2: 848 ll. 5–6; Knauf, “והב,” 37–38 n. 18. The same entry is found in works by al-Zamakhshari and others.

46. Note that the Hebrew rendering of the ANA participle would have postdated the Canaanite vowel shift; hence the rendering of *ā* with (the ancestor of) *qameš* instead of *holam*.

47. In other words, נְהַב could be called “the giving/donor mountain”; cf. Delitzsch’s etymology cited above. For runoff agriculture, see Michael Evenari et al., *The Negev: The Challenge of a Desert* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1971), 95–300. For further discussion of נְהַב, see below.

48. Edward W. Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1863–1877), 2969c s.v.; A. de Biberstein Kazimirski, *Dictionnaire arabe-français* (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1860), 2: 1613b s.v. Cf. Driver’s discussion, cited above.

49. I am indebted to Edward Greenstein (email communication) for this interpretation of Isa. 66:15, according to which “there is gapping here and the B line should be understood: ‘(The Lord will come in) his chariot(s) like a storm.’” He adds that “he will come in fire” and “he will come in his chariot(s)” represent lightning and storm

(Prov. 1:27), provides some support to the suggestion that *בְּסוּפָהּ* ... *אָת* means “come ... in a storm.” In addition to demonstrating the Lord’s presence and terrifying Israel’s foes (cf. *וּבְסוּפָתָךְ הַבְּהֵלֵם* in Ps. 83:16), such a storm would have provided water to the thirsty Israelite warriors at the well of the chieftains and elsewhere.<sup>50</sup>

### הַנְּחָלִים אֲרֹנוֹן

As recognized already in the nineteenth century, *הַנְּחָלִים אֲרֹנוֹן* is an appositional phrase, comparable to *הַנְּהַר פָּרַת* (1 Chr. 5:9), *הַנְּהַר אֶהֱוָא* (Ezra 8:21), *הַנְּהַר שְׁמֵרוֹן* (1 Kgs. 16:24), *הָאֲרֹץ כְּנָעַן* (Num. 34:2), and so on.<sup>51</sup> An unambiguous Akkadian parallel is found twice at Mari: *nahlum Ḥaqat*, translated “l’ouādi Ḥaqat” in ARM (VI 2: 5 and 4: 7) and “the wadi (called) Ḥaqat” alongside “the wadi Ḥaqat” in CAD.<sup>52</sup> The ending of *nahlum* signals that the following attributive noun is appositive rather than genitive. In English, we find similar phrases, such as *the River Nile* and (with the head noun in the plural) *the Brothers Karamazov/Grimm*.<sup>53</sup> There is no need to make *הַנְּחָלִים אֲרֹנוֹן* singular by interpreting it as a genitive phrase with enclitic *mem*, as some scholars do.<sup>54</sup> The plural was well explained already by George Adam Smith:

The Arnon is the present Wady Mojib, an enormous trench across the plateau of Moab ... About thirteen miles from the Dead Sea the trench divides into two branches, one running north-east, the other south-south-east, and each of them again dividing into two ... The southern branch, the present Seil Sa’ideh, called also Safiah, is the principal one, but all the branches probably carried the name Arnon from the main valley right up to the desert. It is not *the valley* but *the valleys* of Arnon, which are named in the ancient fragment of song celebrating Israel’s passage ....<sup>55</sup>

In other words, the phrase *הַנְּחָלִים אֲרֹנוֹן* is the name of a torrent *system*, one that is partly ephemeral and partly perennial. It can refer “not just to the main stream of the Arnon, but to the whole system of streams that feeds into it, all of which were probably known by the one name Arnon (in addition to their own names).”<sup>56</sup> Seebass points out that this interpretation of the phrase fits nicely with the broad use of the term *Ἀρῶν(α)* noted by Dieter Vieweger in Eusebius’s *Onomasticon*.<sup>57</sup> Thus, the literal meaning of the phrase is “the Wadis Arnon.” In the context of our excerpt, however, it refers to only *part* of the system, the part that sur-

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clouds, respectively. As examples of preposition gapping, he cites *וּלְמַשְׁלוֹתָיו* (ל) in Ps. 114:2 and *וּבְ(ב)שְׁמִי* in Exod. 6:3.

50. See further below.

51. See Delitzsch, “Urmossaisches im Pentateuch: IV,” 341; S. R. Driver, *A Treatise on the Use of the Tenses in Hebrew and Some Other Syntactical Questions*, 3rd ed. (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1892), 252 §190; Strack, *Die Bücher*, 427; Gray, *Numbers*, 287; Bruno Baentsch, *Exodus-Leviticus-Numeri* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1903), 579; Ashley, *Numbers*, 407 n. 4; Seebass, *Numeri*, 2: 341.

52. J. R. Kupper, *Correspondance de Bahdi-Lim* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1954), 12–13, 14–15; CAD N/I, 125. For examples involving cities, see GAG 188–89 §134 b, f.

53. I am indebted to Owen Cyrulnik for the latter example.

54. Albright, *Yahweh*, 44; Christensen, “Num. 21:14–15,” 360 n. 7, etc.

55. George Adam Smith, *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1894), 558–59.

56. Ashley, *Numbers*, 412. So too Andrew Dearman, “The Levitical Cities of Reuben and Moabite Toponymy,” *BASOR* 276 (1989): 58; and R. Dennis Cole, *Numbers* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 353. According to Hachohen (*הַנְּהַב בְּסוּפָהּ*, 18 n. 76, 19), W. es-Sa’ideh (a wadi at Mt. Waheb) is also known as W. el-Mōjeb/Mūjib (= Naḥal Arnon), even though it is only a tributary of the latter.

57. Dieter Vieweger, “Μασχανά. κείται δὲ ἐπὶ τοῦ Ἀρῶνᾶ: Ergebnisse eines Surveys im Bereich südöstlich von Mādēbā,” *ZDPV* 111 (1995): 51, cited by Seebass, *Numeri*, 2: 341.

rounds Mt. Waheb almost completely, as discussed below. That is the basis for the rendering above: “the Arnon’s (tributary) wadis (surrounding that mountain).”

### אֶשֶׁד הַנְּחָלִים

This phrase is rendered above as “the confluence of those wadis,” referring to both 1) the spot where the two streams (torrents) converge; and 2) the combined stream (torrent) that flows from that spot, which, in our case, “turns toward the settled area of Ar.”<sup>58</sup> In this phrase, אֶשֶׁד (from the root א-ש-ד, “pour,” known primarily from Aramaic) is rendered by Onqelos with Aramaic שְׁפַךְ (from the root ש-פ-ך, “pour”). Medieval Jewish exegetes compare this rendering to Onqelos’s rendering of אֶשְׁדַּת הַפְּסָגָה (Deut. 3:17) with מְשַׁפֵּךְ מֵרְמָתָא and, in the opposite direction, to Onqelos’s rendering of שְׁפַךְ הַדְּשָׁן (Lev. 4:12) with בֵּית מֵיֶשֶׁד and קִטְמָא.<sup>59</sup> We should also note the rendering of אֶשֶׁד with מַצְבַּב (*maṣabbun*) in Saadia Gaon’s *Tafsīr*.<sup>60</sup> The aptness of Saadia’s rendering can be seen from the definition of *maṣabbun* given by Edward Lane: “A place where water ... pours out or forth, from a river into another river or into the sea ... and from high ground into a valley ....”<sup>61</sup> The last part of this definition may explain the semantic development by which אֶשְׁדוֹת came to mean “slopes” in Hebrew.<sup>62</sup> In any event, the *literal* and/or *original* meaning of אֶשֶׁד הַנְּחָלִים is “the outpouring/effusion of the wadis.”

### שְׁבַת עָר

In this phrase, the verbal noun שְׁבַת has a concrete sense, viz., “*place of dwelling*,” as the verbal nouns *dwelling* and *habitation* often do in English. The rendering given above, “the settled area of Ar,” is based on one of the many uses of the Akkadian cognate of שְׁבַת, viz., *šubtu*. The closest parallel to שְׁבַת עָר found in CAD is the phrase *šubat Kiš*, “the settled area of Kish,” from the Code of Hammurapi.<sup>63</sup> It is often assumed that Ar is either the name of a town or the name of a region; however, it is quite possible that it is both, with one named after the other.<sup>64</sup> As we shall see, there is reason to believe that it was located at the northeast corner of Moab, just south of the Arnon.

58. This interpretation assumes that אֶשֶׁד הַנְּחָלִים exhibits the same ambiguity as the English term *confluence*.

59. For the former, see רבי יוסף בכורו פירושי, 280 to Num. 21:15. For the latter, see Ibn Quraysh, דְּרִיסָאֵלָה, 130 no. 20.

60. *Oeuvres complètes de R. Saadia ben Iosef al-Fayyōûmî*, ed. J. Derenbourg (Paris: Leroux, 1893–99), 1: 226 l. 6.

61. Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, 1640a s.v.

62. Cf. David Qimḥi, ספר השרשים, 28b s.v.: “the slope of a mountain or hill, so called because water ... pours down via the slope.” The precise relationship between אֶשְׁדוֹת and אֶשֶׁד is unclear. It is possible that the singular of אֶשְׁדוֹת is an unattested אֶשְׁדָּה\*, distinct from אֶשֶׁד. Alternatively, אֶשֶׁד may be the construct form of an unattested אֶשְׁדָּה\*, just as יִרְדֵּךְ and כְּתִיף are the construct forms of יָרַד and כָּתַף, respectively. If the latter alternative is true, אֶשֶׁד is the singular of אֶשְׁדוֹת, which, in turn, is the construct of אֶשְׁדוֹת.

63. See CAD S/3, 183, where the meaning “settled area of a town” is given for *šubtu* A 4c.

64. Cf. מִיָּבָא/מְהֵרָה (< מִ/מְהֵרָה דְּבָא > “waters of vigor”; cf. Deut. 33:25), which, in ancient times, was arguably the name of the region of Moab that included the hot springs of Maʿīn (مَعِين < מעין, “spring?”), whose curative waters restore vigor to old people, as well as the name of a town in that region. So, too, in modern Jordan, *Mādabā* (مادبا) is the name of the governate in which Maʿīn is located, as well as the name of a town in that region; cf. New York, NY. Hacothen (יְהוּבָא בְּסוּפָה), 9 with n. 22) notes that the expression שְׁבַת עָר has been cited as evidence that עָר denotes a region rather than a town; however, the Akkadian usage cited in the previous footnote weakens that argument. For the view that Ar was both “a city of Moab” and “a synonym of Moab,” see Burton MacDonald, “East of the Jordan”: *Territories and Sites of the Hebrew Scriptures* (Boston, MA: ASOR, 2000), 75.

### וּמִשָּׁם בְּאֶרֶה

This phrase is elliptical, lacking the verb of motion expected with phrases of the form “from there to X.” It is usually assumed that the understood verb is the perfect נָסַעוּ.<sup>65</sup> That assumption makes בְּאֶרֶה וּמִשָּׁם בְּאֶרֶה a continuation of the itinerary in Num. 21:12–13: מִשָּׁם נָסַעוּ ... וַיִּחַנּוּ בְּנַחַל זָרָד: מִשָּׁם נָסַעוּ וַיִּחַנּוּ מֵעֵבֶר אֲרִנּוֹן. And it makes vv. 14b–15 a digression—a brief excerpt from the Book of the Wars of the Lord—after which, in v. 16, “the chronicle resumes its delineation of the Israelite route, taking up where Numbers 21:13 left off.”<sup>66</sup> This reading, however, is problematic because it creates “three ... stations in vv. 18b–20 which are not attested elsewhere (Mattanah, Nahaliel, Bamoth).”<sup>67</sup> By contrast, in the reading presented here, Mattanah, Nahaliel, and Bamoth are not stations, although at least two of them are in the *vicinity* of stations. The reading takes בְּאֶרֶה וּמִשָּׁם בְּאֶרֶה as a continuation of the exhortation in 21:14b–15, with the understood verb being the imperative אָת, “come”; cf. וּלְכוּ מִשָּׁם חַמַּת (Amos 6:2).<sup>68</sup> In other words, the audience is urged to come and see “the well that the chieftains dug, that the nobles of the people excavated.” We may perhaps compare what the Rabbis say about that well, which they call “Miriam’s well,” in the Talmud: הַרוּצָה לְרֵאוֹת, “He who wishes to see Miriam’s well should ascend to the summit of Mt. Carmel and look out, and he will see a sort of sieve in the sea—that will be Miriam’s well” (b. Shabbat 35a).<sup>69</sup> Here, too, the well of Num. 21 is portrayed as a sightseeing attraction.

The word בְּאֶרֶה is ambiguous in its own right. It can be taken to mean “to Beer” (a toponym) or, as assumed here, “to the/a well” (a common noun). If בְּאֶרֶה means “to the well,” it resembles אֶרֶץ, which frequently means “to the earth/ground” (Gen. 24:52, 38:9, 44:11, Exod. 4:3, 9:23, 33, 1 Sam. 14:45, 26:20, 2 Sam. 2:22, etc.), despite the absence of the definite article.<sup>70</sup> If בְּאֶרֶה is indefinite, it refers to a well whose identity is established in the immediately following phrase and whose name, we later learn, is מַתְנָה.<sup>71</sup>

65. See already Saadia Gaon (*Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1, 226 l. 7: ורחלו מן תם אלי אלביר, “and they traveled from there to the well”), Ibn Ezra, etc. As a parallel one might cite וּמִן הַגְּדֻדָה וּמִן הַגְּדֻדָה יִטְבְּתָהּ (Deut. 10:7), with נָסַעוּ understood in the second half. For a claim that the understood verb cannot be נָסַעוּ, see Hayyim Paltiel, *פרושי התורה לר' חיים פלטיאל*, ed. Isaak S. Lange (Jerusalem: n.p., 1981), 539 to Num. 21:16.

66. Levine, *Numbers 21–36*, 95. See already the comment of Nahmanides on בְּאֶרֶה וּמִשָּׁם בְּאֶרֶה in *פירושי התורה*, vol. 2, 284 ll. 20–21. Another possibility, pointed out to me by Adina Moshavi (email communication), would be to take בְּאֶרֶה וּמִשָּׁם בְּאֶרֶה as a continuation of the relative clause that modifies אֶשְׁד הַנְּחָלִים. In that case, the understood verb could be נָטָה.

67. Frevel, “Understanding,” 132.

68. The interchange of א-ת-י and ה-ל-ך in expressing “come from there” may be compared with the interchange of ב-ו-א and ה-ל-ך in similar phrases. For example, in I Kings 13 we find two ways of expressing “come home with me,” viz., בָּאָה אִתִּי הַבַּיְתָה (v. 7) and לָךְ אִתִּי הַבַּיְתָה (v. 15).

69. The Rabbis pictured Miriam’s well as a round stone vessel perforated like a sieve, with water gushing from the holes, that accompanied the Israelites in the desert (cf. the allusion to this midrash in 1 Cor. 10:4). In Palestinian sources (Leviticus Rabba and the Palestinian Talmud), the mountain is called הַר יְשִׁמוֹן and the sea is הַיָּם שֶׁלְטַבְרִיָּה, the Sea of Galilee. The name הַר יְשִׁמוֹן is presumably derived from Num. 21:19 and/or 23:28.

70. Contra Gray (*Numbers*, 288), who argues that the interpretation “to the well,” assumed by the Septuagint, is precluded by its lack of a definite article. For “to the well” in Saadia Gaon’s translation, see n. 65 above.

71. This interpretation is similar to that of Seebass, *Numeri*, 2: 334. According to him, בְּאֶרֶה means “to a well,” and מַתְנָה is “a place or a tract of land that . . . was situated near the divine well and for that very reason was called ‘Gift’.”

## עֲנוּ לָהּ

The command to sing, עֲנוּ לָהּ, contains a seemingly ambiguous preposition. It can apparently mean either “sing to it!” or “sing of it!” In support of “sing to,” we may cite עֲנוּ לָהּ בְּתוֹרָה, “sing to the Lord with thanksgiving!” (Ps. 147:7). For “sing of,” we may compare לָהּ כְּרִים חֲמֹד עֲנוּ לָהּ, “a delightful vineyard, sing of it!” (Isa. 27:2). The latter parallel, involving an *inanimate* noun, seems more relevant to our case, despite the vocalization of עֲנוּ as a *pi<sup>c</sup>el*.

It has been claimed that the song is not merely celebratory: “by singing this song at this specific site, Israel denoted its legal claim to the right of ownership of the territory concerned.”<sup>72</sup> In my view, it would be more accurate to say that the song serves as a witness/record (cf. Deut. 31:19, 21) to/of the legal ceremony (cf. Gen. 21:30) that established a claim to ownership of the *well* (cf. 21:25) or the *water* (cf. 26:20) and the right of way to it. The legal ceremony for staking the claim will be discussed below.

## HYDROLOGY: WATER AND WADI

Before discussing the rest of the Song of the Well, we need to examine the hydrology of wadis. We begin with the Negev:

Since rainfall is meager and erratic in the desert, the first question that arises is how underground water is created in a desert area . . . The local source is floodwater seeping through the gravel beds in the wadis during and immediately after local floods . . .

The gravel beds are relatively permeable and as the floodwater infiltrates downward it fills the free spaces between the gravel stones and sand grains. Since the gravel wadi beds in the Negev usually overlie a less permeable limestone formation, the water that infiltrates downward remains underground and becomes a perched water table with the gravel bed as the aquifer. The wadis usually have a fairly steep slope (about 1–3 percent) and this underground perched water flows slowly downstream. If one digs a hole into the wadi bed and reaches this water table he finds water. If he empties this hole of water he will also discover that the water is replenished or recharged into the hole after some time . . .<sup>73</sup>

In Moab, too, we find subterranean streams, often flowing beneath the wadi beds:

Against the western slope of the highland springs are numerous. The rainwater, which falls on the highland, filters through the porous limestone to the watertight layers, whence it flows westward along subterranean watercourses only to reach the ground surface in the dales . . .<sup>74</sup>

Precipitation is readily absorbed through surface marls and limestone and transported horizontally, forming underground channels . . . This water emerges in the form of springs in the wadi bottoms . . .<sup>75</sup>

In both regions, the best time to find water in the seemingly dry bed of a wadi is after a storm. Torrential rainstorms create flash floods that sweep down the wadis. Even after the puddles have dried up, desert nomads and desert animals dig down ca. 20–40 centimeters to reach the perched water beneath the gravel bed of the wadi;<sup>76</sup> cf. וַיִּחְפְּרוּ עֲבָדֵי יִצְחָק בְּנַחַל, “Isaac’s servants dug in the wadi and found there a well of flowing (lit. living) water” (Gen. 26:19). In some spots, the perched water table comes so close to the

72. A. H. van Zyl, *The Moabites* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1960), 7.

73. Evenari, *Negev*, 150.

74. Zyl, *Moabites*, 54.

75. Bruce Routledge, *Moab in the Iron Age: Hegemony, Polity, Archaeology* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 50.

76. Evenari, *Negev*, 151–53.

surface that a spring gushes out onto the bed; cf. הַמְשַׁלַּח מַעְיָנִים בְּנֹחָלִים בֵּין הָרִים יִהְלֶכֶן, “He who releases springs in the wadis, flowing between the mountains” (Ps. 104:10). However, in reading the following section, one should keep in mind that most wadis are ephemeral, not a dependable source of water; cf. אַחֵי בְּגָדוֹ כְּמוֹ-נַחַל כְּאַפְיֵק נֹחָלִים יַעֲבֹרוּ, “my friends (lit. brothers) have betrayed (me) like a wadi, like a bed on which streams used to run by” (Job 6:15; cf. Jer. 15:18 and Joel 1:20).

בְּאֵר תְּפְרוּהָ שָׂרִים כְּרוּהָ נְדִיבֵי הָעַם בְּמַחֲקֵק בְּמַשְׁעָנֹתָם

This description of the well is problematic, as noted by Noth: “That nobles actually dug a well with the staves which they carried as signs of their power is difficult to accept.”<sup>77</sup> Eryl Davies provides more detail: “It is most unlikely that the leaders of the nation would have been engaged in such a laborious activity; moreover, the instruments which they carried (the sceptre and staves) can hardly have been regarded as suitable implements for digging a well.”<sup>78</sup> In other words, both the workers and the tools are anomalous.<sup>79</sup> A third problem is pointed out by Karl Budde. According to him, the description above (v. 18) contradicts מִים מֵאֵר הַבְּאֵר אֲשֶׁר אָמַר ה' לְמִשְׁהָ אִסַּף אֶת-הָעַם וְאֶתְנָה לָהֶם מִים (v. 16), since the latter seems to hint at some unusual provision of water while v. 18 appears to speak of the ordinary method of obtaining water, viz., by digging a well.<sup>80</sup>

These three problems disappear once we recognize that the chieftains never had any intention of digging a well on their own and never anticipated striking water with their staffs. The insertion of their staffs, the scepters symbolizing their authority,<sup>81</sup> into the (seemingly dry) bed of the wadi was intended as a kind of groundbreaking ceremony to mark the initiation of a well-digging project<sup>82</sup> and as a kind of flag-planting or claim-staking ceremony to establish ownership of any water that might be discovered.<sup>83</sup> They had planned to have others do the actual excavation work following the ceremony. However, something quite unexpected occurred: the ceremony was all that was needed. The Lord had provided water by selecting

77. Noth, *Numbers*, 160.

78. Davies, *Numbers*, 222. For the second problem, see also Dillmann, *Numeri*, 125; Karl Budde, “Noch etwas vom Volksliede des alten Israel,” *Preussische Jahrbücher* 82 (1895): 493 = idem, “The Song of the Well,” *The New World* 4 (1895): 139; and Heinrich Holzinger, *Numeri* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1903), 97. For a different view, see Philippe Reymond, *L'eau, sa vie, et sa signification dans l'Ancien Testament* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1958), 134–35.

79. Joseph Bekhor Shor (פירוש רבי יוסף בכור) 280 to Num. 21:18) notes the same two anomalies. Normally, he says, wells are dug by servants (as in Gen. 26:19) using a spade (מרא) and a mattock (פסל). For him, however, these anomalies are not problems but evidence of the extraordinary nature of the well. See immediately below.

80. Budde, “Noch etwas,” 493 = idem, “Song,” 138. Cf. Gray, *Numbers*, 288; and Seebass, *Numeri*, 2: 333.

81. See above and cf. the reference to משענת השררות, “the staff of dominion,” in פירוש רבי יוסף בכור, 280 to Num. 21:18.

82. So, too, Theodor H. Gaster, *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament* (Gloucester, MA: Smith, 1981), 302: “The digging of the well is often ceremoniously inaugurated by the sheikh or headman, and it is to this, undoubtedly, that the words of our song refer.” Oddly enough, Budde (“Noch etwas,” 495 = idem, “Song,” 140), too, views digging with staffs as a “symbolic act, such as is still practiced with us, at the laying of the corner-stone or capstone of a building, in the first spade stroke for a canal, or the last stroke in cutting a canal, or even the handful of earth thrown on the coffin of a relative or friend.” That view would ordinarily resolve the alleged contradiction between vv. 16 and 18, but Budde undermines this resolution by assuming that the symbolic act of the chieftains was performed *after* the well was dug: “The well, after being found and dug, was lightly covered over or stopped up, so that the sceptres of the sheikhs could remove the obstruction, and thus they became implements for digging” (“Noch etwas,” 495 = idem, “Song,” 139). This oft-cited assumption is rightly rejected by Holzinger, *Numeri*, 97; and Shmuel Ahituv, *שירת הבאר*, in *Isac Leo Seeligmann Volume*, ed. Alexander Rofé and Yair Zakovitch (Jerusalem: Rubinstein, 1983), 1: 59–60.

83. This legal ceremony is memorialized by the song; see above.

a spot where no digging was required—presumably a spot where the underground layer of stone, with its stream of perched water, was very close to the surface.<sup>84</sup> In the words of Clyde Woods and Justin Rogers: “The song in verses 17 and 18 celebrates provision of water in the wilderness, this time through divinely directed discovery of a bountiful well-site (cf. Gen. 21:19). In an area where water lay just below the dry surface, the leaders (princes . . . nobles), obediently and symbolically beginning the diggings with scepters and staffs, struck water, to the amazement of the people.”<sup>85</sup> This is probably what Abraham Ibn Ezra had in mind when he wrote: “This well was also a wonder (פלא). It is not the well called ‘Miriam’s well’, in my opinion, but rather a place where, at Moses’s command, the chieftains dug with their staffs and immediately the water flowed forth (חפרוהו שרי ישראל במשענותם ומיד נבעו המים).”<sup>86</sup>

#### ETHNOGRAPHY: A BEDOUIN PARALLEL TO THE SONG OF THE WELL

Support for the notion that the original plan called for a two-step procedure—the insertion of staffs followed by the actual excavation work—comes from the ethnographic research of Alois Musil. Here is his description of the procedure for digging wells in Transjordan a century ago: “At suitable spots, after breaking up the earth with staffs, the Bedouins take out the stones with their hands, thereby creating larger openings, up to two meters wide, in which the water gathers . . . Although the chiefs seldom lend a hand, it is always said that Sheikh or Prince so-and-so dug this well.”<sup>87</sup> He adds that each tent had its own well.<sup>88</sup> We should probably assume that the staffs used to break up the earth next to each tent belonged to the head of the family in that tent.

The importance of this Bedouin parallel is greatly enhanced by Musil’s publication of a song sung a century ago by Bedouins (the Benī Ṣakhr = Dahamsheh tribe in Transjordan) while watering their camels. Most of the song deals with the camels but the first three couplets deal mainly with the well from which the men are drawing water:<sup>89</sup>

<p><i>Ṣaḫḫāk allāh jā bīr</i>  <i>min al-wabel ṣḥātīr</i>  <i>Ebḥer jā maʿ</i></p>	<p>May Allah cause you to drink, O well,          boatloads [lit. barges] of pouring rain.<sup>90</sup>          Become as wide as the sea,<sup>91</sup> O water,</p>
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84. See already Franz Delitzsch, “Urmosaisches im Pentateuch: V. Das Brunnenlied Num. XXI, 17. 18,” *ZKWL* 3 (1882): 454; and Alois Musil, “Miscellen zur Bibelforschung,” *Die Kultur* 11 (1910): 5–6, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=njp.32101064480930&view=1up&seq=13>.

85. Clyde M. Woods and Justin M. Rogers, *Leviticus and Numbers* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2006), 313. Cf. Jacob Licht, *פירוש על ספר במדבר* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1985–1995), 2: 230: “this well came to them not through the use of real work tools and not through toil, but through ceremonial—and almost symbolic—digging.”

86. This version of Ibn Ezra’s comment on Num. 21:16 is from *ספר במדבר: מקראות גדולות הכתר*, ed. Menachem Cohen (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan Univ., 2011), 141 s.v.

87. Musil, “Miscellen,” 5–6. In Gen. 21:30, Abraham is able to assert, in the first person singular, “I dug this well”—even though the actual digging was presumably done by servants (cf. Gen. 26:19)—either because he performed the groundbreaking/claim-staking ceremony or because he commanded his servants to do the work; for the latter possibility, see Richard C. Steiner, *A Biblical Translation in the Making: The Evolution and Impact of Saadia Gaon’s Tafsīr* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ., Center for Jewish Studies, 2010), 123–24.

88. Musil, “Miscellen,” 5.

89. Alois Musil, *Arabia Petraea* (Vienna: Holder, 1907–1908), 3: 259.

90. This rendering is more faithful to the Arabic than Musil’s *mit Regen in Hülle und Fülle*.

91. For this rendering, see Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, 156b s.v. *baḥura*. The section assigning this meaning to the *first* form is easy to miss, which may explain Theodor Nöldeke’s hesitation in *ZDMG* 61 (1907): 232 n. 2 (review of Alois Musil, *Kuṣejr ‘Amra*). Musil’s German gloss, *quill*, “gush!”, is less faithful to the Arabic original. Even less faithful to the Arabic is the mysterious rendering of imperative *quill* (changed to *quelle auf* in “Miscellen,” 5) with the noun “wood”—a rendering given by many English-speaking Bible scholars (including Milgrom).

<i>erđi</i> <sup>92</sup> <i>ğemâma</i>	flow in abundance.
<i>Ešrabi lā tâferînu</i>	Drink (O female camel), do not spurn it,
<i>bikađiben hâferînu</i>	with a staff we have dug it out.

Musil pointed out the similarity between this Bedouin well song and the biblical one. Indeed, he asserted that the singing of both songs took place in W. et-Temed.<sup>93</sup> Theodor Nöldeke, too, was impressed by what he described as “the almost word-for-word similarity.”<sup>94</sup> Many recent scholars have followed in their footsteps. One similarity is that the well is addressed, with the noun *bîr* < *biʿr* = בְּאֵר appearing in the vocative. Its water (or, by synecdoche, it itself) is commanded to rise from the underground water table onto the wadi bed. Another similarity, according to the reading proposed here, is that both the Bedouin song and the poetic prelude to the biblical song allude to the rainstorms (*al-wabel* = סוּפָה) that supply the well with its water. The third and most important similarity is the appearance of a formula meaning “X dug (*h-plf-r*) it with (*bi-*) a staff”: *bikađiben hâferînu* = בִּמְחַקֵּק ... חֲפְרוּהָ. This portion of the two songs memorializes the legal ceremony that established a claim to ownership of a well and its water. *The millennia-long preservation of the associated legal formula in the same general area must be attributed to its life-and-death significance for the desert nomads who roamed there.*

#### וּמִמַּדְבָּר מַתְנָה

This phrase is ambiguous, and the ambiguity has given rise to controversy. In my view, the controversy can be resolved by recognizing that the phrase is at the center of a clever word play. In the *primary* reading of the phrase, Hebrew מַתְנָה is a common noun, and the phrase is part of—indeed, the conclusion of—the Song of the Well.<sup>95</sup> In that reading, it implies that the well was a gift from the desert. This is, more or less, the reading of the targums.<sup>96</sup> According to them, the phrase is elliptical, with an understood נַתְנָה, yielding “and from the desert, a gift was given” or (most clearly in the case of Pseudo-Jonathan) “and from the desert, it (= the well) was given as a gift.” They are followed by Numbers Rabba (19, 26), and many medieval Jewish exegetes.

By the time we reach the next phrase, וּמִמַּתְנָה נַחֲלֵי־אֵל, a *secondary* reading of מַתְנָה becomes apparent, viz., “and from the desert, (come) to Mattanah.” In that reading מַתְנָה is a

92. Musil’s symbol *r* is equivalent to modern *ğ*; see, for example, in fig. 4 below. Nöldeke alters *erđi* to *egđi* in his review of *Ḳuṣejr ʿAmra*, 232 with n. 3. Unaware of this, Driver (“Geographical Problems,” 17\*) misinterprets the verb.

93. See, for example, his remarks in *Anzeiger der kaiserlichen Akademie des Wissenschaften (in Wien); Philologisch-historische Klasse* 40 (1903): 44; and his description (*Arabia Petraea*, vol. 1, 297; and “Miscellen,” 5) of the underground stream flowing .3 meter to 1 meter below the surface of W. et-Temed. Others who believe W. et-Temed to be the site of the biblical well include Nelson Glueck, “Explorations in Eastern Palestine, I,” *AASOR* 14 (1933–1934): 13; E. D. Grohman, “Beer,” *IDB* 1: 374b; and Arthur J. Ferch, “Beer,” *ABD* 1: 640a. However, the context suggests that the well was located in a tributary of Naḥal Arnon that formed the northern border of Moab.

94. Nöldeke, review of *Ḳuṣejr ʿAmra*, 232.

95. Among the modern scholars who have adopted this reading are Budde, “Noch etwas,” 497–98 = idem, “Song,” 141–42; Baentsch, *Exodus-Leviticus-Numeri*, 580; Smith, “Early Poetry,” 64; Milgrom, *Numbers*, 178; Cole, *Numbers*, 355; and NEB. Budde (to whom modern scholars attribute this interpretation) tied this interpretation to two departures from MT, and some scholars have rejected his interpretation for that reason; see Philip J. Budd, *Numbers* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1984), 237; R. K. Harrison, *Numbers: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 282; Ashley, *Numbers*, 407 n. 8; Davies, *Numbers*, 222. The interpretation of the context proposed here eliminates the problems that Budde’s emendations were designed to solve.

96. See Germain Bienaimé, *Moïse et le don de l’eau dans la tradition juive ancienne: Targum et midrash* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1984), 158–60, 163–64.

toponym, the understood verb is the imperative אָת, “come,” and וּמִמְדָּבָר מִתְּנָה is *not* part of the Song of the Well. It is, rather, a resumptive repetition of וּמִשָּׁם בְּאֵרָהּ, “and from there, (the confluence at Mt. Waheb in the desert, come) to a/the well (named Mattanah).”

This secondary reading did not arise by accident. It seems clear that וּמִמְדָּבָר מִתְּנָה has been carefully formulated to make it match the structure of the following phrases, viz., “from GN1 (to) GN2.” The result is Janus parallelism, with וּמִמְדָּבָר מִתְּנָה functioning as the *pivot*<sup>97</sup> between the Song of the Well and the matrix poem in which it is embedded.

A few exegetes have wondered about the syntax of וּמִמְדָּבָר מִתְּנָה in the primary reading. Nahmanides cites Onqelos and adds: “It is an elliptical expression (of the kind) that occurs in songs/poems (לשון קצר יבוא בשירות).”<sup>98</sup> Jacob Licht, by contrast, finds the syntax assumed by Onqelos “very strange.”<sup>99</sup> Licht’s assertion is too vague to evaluate, but it should be stated that Onqelos’s rendering need not be treated as a precise syntactic analysis. Underlying structures that reflect a *similar* meaning should also be considered. For example, the phrase may be elliptical for וּמִמְדָּבָר יִצְאָה מִתְּנָה\*, “from the desert, a gift emerged,” as in וּמִעֵז וּיִצָּא מִתּוֹק, “from the strong, something sweet emerged” (Judg. 14:14).

Another possibility would be to take וּמִמְדָּבָר מִתְּנָה not as an elliptical clause but as a noun phrase—a noun phrase whose structure and word order (with the indefinite head noun last) is similar to that of Punic לאדן לבעל מתנת, “a gift for the lord, Baal.”<sup>100</sup> In that case, it would mean “a gift from the desert” (as translated above), and it would stand in apposition to the preceding noun phrase, בְּאֵר תְּפֹרֶה שְׁרִים כְּרוּהָ נְדִיבֵי הָעַם בְּמִחְקֵק בְּמִשְׁעֲנֵתָם. The conjunction -ו is not an insurmountable obstacle to this analysis. That conjunction can connect an appositive with its head, in which case it is traditionally known as a *waw explicativum*.<sup>101</sup> In any event, since וּמִמְדָּבָר מִתְּנָה has been formulated deliberately to make it match the structure and word order of the following phrases, any deviation from normal syntax can be attributed to poetic license.

### נַחְלֵי־אֵל

The targumic view that the first component of נַחְלֵי־אֵל<sup>102</sup> is the Hebrew word for wadi has been widely accepted in modern times.<sup>103</sup> It has been suggested that Targum Neofiti and Aquila go a step further, reading נַחְלֵי־אֵל.<sup>104</sup> Part of this suggestion has been developed by Jacob Milgrom: “Targum Neofiti renders ‘swelling torrents,’ taking the second element ’*el*

97. For this term, see Gene M. Schramm, “Poetic Patterning in Biblical Hebrew” in *Michigan Oriental Studies in Honor of George G. Cameron*, ed. L. L. Orlin et al. (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan, 1976), 178–79; and Scott B. Noegel, *Janus Parallelism in the Book of Job* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 13.

98. Ramban, פירושי התורה, 2: 284 l. 23.

99. Licht, פירוש על ספר במדבר, 2: 230.

100. KAI 99 l. 1.

101. For a discussion of this term, see Richard C. Steiner, “Does the Biblical Hebrew Conjunction -ו Have Many Meanings, One Meaning, or No Meaning at All?” *JBL* 119 (2000): 264–65.

102. For an uncertain epigraphic parallel to this toponym, see Martin Heide, “‘One Sack for a Beqa’ of Jerusalem’: A Puzzling Ostrakon from the Shlomo Moussaieff Collection,” in *Shlomo—Studies in Epigraphy, Iconography, History and Archaeology in Honor of Shlomo Moussaieff*, ed. Robert Deutsch (Tel Aviv: Archaeological Center, 2003), 111–13. I am indebted to Shmuel Ahituv for this reference.

103. See, for example, Dillmann, *Numeri*, 125; Smith, *Historical Geography*, 561–62; Gray, *Numbers*, 290–91; Baentsch, *Exodus-Leviticus-Numeri*, 580; Randall W. Younker, “Nahaliel,” *ABD* 4, 995a; Ashley, *Numbers*, 414; Davies, *Numbers*, 223; Cole, *Numbers*, 355; Seebass, *Numeri*, 2: 342; Woods and Rogers, *Leviticus and Numbers*, 313.

104. J. de Vaux, *Les nombres* (Paris: Gabalda, 1972), 240. Their renderings are לנחלין מתגברין and εις χεϊμάρρους ισχυρῶν (fort. ισχυρῶν), respectively.

not as ‘God’ but as the adjective ‘mighty (wadis)’ (see *harerei* <sup>ʿ</sup>*el*, ‘mighty mountains’; Ps. 36:7), an apt description of the terrain north of the Arnon where Israel was encamped.”<sup>105</sup>

This interpretation does not require revocalization of נַחְלִי to נַחְלִי. It seems likely that נַחְלִיאֵל is derived from a Canaanite dialect that, like Phoenician and Northern Hebrew, contracted unstressed \**ay* to *i* (but stressed \**ay* to *ē*).<sup>106</sup> This assumption is supported by the vocalization of 1) דִּיבוּן < \**Daybān*,<sup>107</sup> occurring eleven verses after נַחְלִיאֵל; and perhaps also 2) סִיחוּן < \**Sayhān*?<sup>108</sup> occurring two verses after נַחְלִיאֵל; and 3) פְּנִיָּאֵל, derived from פְּנִים, “face.” If so, נַחְלִיאֵל is derived from a dialectal variant of נַחְלִי-אֵל\*,<sup>109</sup> which, in turn, is a poetic expression comparable to הַרְרִיאֵל (Ps. 36:7) and אַרְנֵיאֵל (Ps. 80:11). Just as the two latter phrases refer to mighty mountains and mighty cedars (of Lebanon), respectively, so too נַחְלִיאֵל appears to be derived from a phrase referring to mighty canyons.<sup>110</sup>

This toponym probably refers to an area near the Dead Sea, since that is where the Transjordanian wadis turn into breathtaking canyons. If the Israelites followed the route of הַנְּחָלִים אַרְנוֹן (W. es-Saʿīdeh to W. eṣ-Ṣ(u)fei to W. el-Mōjeb/Mūjib, the Arnon proper) in traveling from Mt. Waheb in the Desert of Kedemoth (at the *eastern* border of Sihon’s kingdom) to the Steppes of Moab (at the *western* border), they would eventually have reached the confluence of W. el-Mōjeb/Mūjib with W. el-Heidān,<sup>111</sup> ca. 35 km from the Dead Sea, in a beautiful scenic area called *el-Malāqī*. The latter, where two “mighty canyons” meet, is one possibility for the location of נַחְלִיאֵל.

105. Milgrom, *Numbers*, 178. Cf. פִּירוּשֵׁי רַבֵּי יוֹסֵף בַּבְּרַךְ, 280 to Num. 21:19: “it became stronger, turning into a great stream, for אֵל is an expression of strength.”

106. For this sound change and its preservation in biblical poetry, see Richard C. Steiner, “On the Monophthongization of \**ay* to *i* in Phoenician and Northern Hebrew and the Preservation of Archaic/Dialectal Forms in the Masoretic Vocalization,” *Orientalia* 76 (2007): 73–83; and idem, “Poetic Forms in the Masoretic Vocalization and Three Difficult Phrases in Jacob’s Blessing: יְתֵר שְׂאֵת (Gen. 49:3), יְצֻרֵי עֵלָה (Gen. 49:4) and זְבֹא שִׁילָה (Gen. 49:10),” *JBL* 129 (2010): 218 (יצרועי instead of the expected יצועי).

107. For \**Daybān*, reconstructed based on Moabite (Mesha) *Dybn* (4x) and Greek Δαίβων, see W. Randall Garr, *Dialect Geography of Syria-Palestine, 1000–586 B.C.E.* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 37–38; and Steiner, “Monophthongization,” 77.

108. The Talmud (RH 3a) derives the Transjordanian royal name סִיחוּן from MH סִיחָה, “donkey foal.” (The spelling שִׁיחַ is uncommon and probably hypercorrect.) Evidence for this derivation comes from the Transjordanian royal name עֶגְלוֹן, derived from עֶגְלָה, “calf”; indeed, סִיחָה is almost always paired with עֶגְלָה in the Mishnah. (Cf. also the princely name נַחְשׁוֹן, derived from נַחֵשׁ, “snake.”) If this proposal is correct, the form נַחְלִיאֵל may reflect Sihon’s dialect rather than Mesha’s.

109. Cf. the Ephraimite toponym נַחְלִי גַעֲשׁ, appearing as Ναχαλιγαιας (2 Sam. 23:30) and Ναχαλιγαιας (1 Chron. 11:32) in LXX.

110. This etymology is very attractive despite apparent counterevidence in the Septuagint, viz., the rendering of נַחְלִיאֵל as Νααλιηλ. The rendering is problematic because נַחְלִי קְרִירוֹן (Jer. 31:40) appears as ναχαλ Κεδρων (Jer. 38:40) and נַחְלִי גַעֲשׁ appears as Ναχαλιγαιας (see n. 109 above), with the uvular \**h* of נַחְלִי correctly rendered by Greek *chi* (cf. Ugaritic *nhl*, “wadi”). Νααλιηλ, with its zero-rendering of ה, would normally reflect a pharyngeal \**h*, pointing to a derivation from נַחְלָה (cf. Ugaritic *nhl*, “property, inheritance”). However, this derivation is equally difficult, given the absence of the feminine ending in נַחְלִיאֵל and Νααλιηλ (contrast Ugaritic *nhl*; and Mari Akkadian *nihlatum*, “property handed over,” vs. *nahlum*, “wadi”). It is no wonder, then, that Νααλιηλ is characterized as exhibiting “uncertain etymology” by Joshua Blau, *On Polyphony in Biblical Hebrew* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1982), 58; cf. Richard C. Steiner, “On the Dating of Hebrew Sound Changes (\**H* > *H* and \**Ġ* > *ʿ*) and Greek Translations (2 Esdras and Judith),” *JBL* 124 (2005): 251–52. The conflicting evidence suggests that the rendering Νααλιηλ is the product of contamination between two homographic (and almost homophonic) Hebrew roots in the Alexandrian reading tradition; cf. James Barr, *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1987), 108–10.

111. For the route and the confluence, see fig. 1 below. For the Arnon near the Dead Sea, see fig. 6 below.

## בְּמוֹת

This toponym, known only from Moab, is frequently attested there.<sup>112</sup> Judging from the next two toponyms, this Bamoth is probably the one associated with Balaam, viz., Bamoth-baal (Num. 22:41).<sup>113</sup>

## הַגֵּיא

This valley, mentioned *immediately before* ראש הפסגה in our excerpt, must be “the valley (גֵּיא) in front of Beth-peor,” mentioned *two verses after* ראש הפסגה in Deut. 3:27–29. Beth-peor was presumably the temple of Baal, or its location, on/at Mt. Peor, near the valley where the Israelites were encamped when 1) Balak tried to have them cursed from Mt. Peor (Num. 23:28); and 2) an Israelite chieftain was enticed by a Midianite princess to participate in the cult of Baal Peor (25:3–18). The account of 2) seems to contain the main ingredients of the sacred marriage ceremony described at length in Papyrus Amherst 63:<sup>114</sup> sexual union in a sacred bridal chamber (הַקְּבֵה) erected on a sacred height (הַפְּעוֹר) in a sacred grove (בְּשֵׁטִים), “in the [grove of] acacias” or “in Shittim,” a place named after such a grove). This interpretation assumes, of course, that a) Σαττείν . . . παράκειται τῷ ὄρει Φογῶρ, “Shittim . . . lies next to Mt. Peor”;<sup>115</sup> and b) the events described in 2) took place during a New Year’s festival.

## רֹאשׁ הַפְּסָגָה וְנֹשְׂקָהּ עַל-פְּנֵי הַיְשִׁימֹן

It has been noted that the list of sites in Num. 21:10–20 “ends with three locations which are all linked to the setting of the following stories of Balaam.”<sup>116</sup> This observation deals with the *geographic* ties to the Balaam pericope, but ignores the *literary* link, which is even stronger. The poetic phrase רֹאשׁ הַפְּסָגָה וְנֹשְׂקָהּ עַל-פְּנֵי הַיְשִׁימֹן, “the top of Pisgah, overlooking the wasteland” (21:19), has a prosaic counterpart in רֹאשׁ הַפְּעוֹר הַנֹּשֶׂקֶה עַל-פְּנֵי הַיְשִׁימֹן, “the top of Peor, overlooking the wasteland” (23:28). If so, רֹאשׁ הַפְּסָגָה וְנֹשְׂקָהּ עַל-פְּנֵי הַיְשִׁימֹן is a kind of relative clause—an attributive modifier of רֹאשׁ הַפְּסָגָה, just as רֹאשׁ הַפְּעוֹר הַנֹּשֶׂקֶה עַל-פְּנֵי הַיְשִׁימֹן is an attributive modifier of רֹאשׁ הַפְּעוֹר. The conjunction -ו- functions here as it does in וּמִגְדָּל וְרֹאשׁוֹ בַשָּׁמַיִם, “and a tower whose top is in the sky” (Gen. 11:4), where וְרֹאשׁוֹ בַשָּׁמַיִם is an attributive modifier of מִגְדָּל.<sup>117</sup>

The similarity between the two phrases, which appear only two chapters apart in Numbers, is very striking. It calls attention to the fact that our excerpt ends with sites—at the western border of Sihon’s kingdom—related to the Lord’s conflicts with Balak and the five Midianite rulers.

## WAHEB AND ITS WADIS

The discussion thus far suggests that our excerpt is more intelligible, linguistically and geographically, than scholars have thought. We can go even further with the help of

112. Milgrom, *Numbers*, 178.

113. Noth, *Numbers*, 160; Siegfried Mittmann, “Die Gebietsbeschreibung des Stammes Ruben in Josua 13,15–23,” *ZDPV* 111 (1995): 23; and Wolfgang Zwickel, “Der Durchzug der Israeliten durch das Ostjordanland,” *UF* 22 (1990): 491 (“perhaps”).

114. Richard C. Steiner and Charles F. Nims, “The Aramaic Text in Demotic Script: Text, Translation, and Notes” (published online, 2017), XI/1–3, XVI/7–19, XVIII/1–3, and passim. See <https://repository.yu.edu/handle/20.500.12202/51>.

115. Eusebius, *Onomasticon*, ed. R. Steven Notley and Zev Safrai (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 144.

116. Frevel, “Understanding,” 132.

117. See Steiner, “Biblical Hebrew Conjunction,” 265.





Fig. 2. Khirbet el-M(u)deyyeneh from the south; taken from Chaim Ben David, “The Mudayna Sites of the Arnon Tributaries: ‘Midian alongside Moab’?,” *Antiquo Oriente* 15 (2017): 154. Reprinted with permission

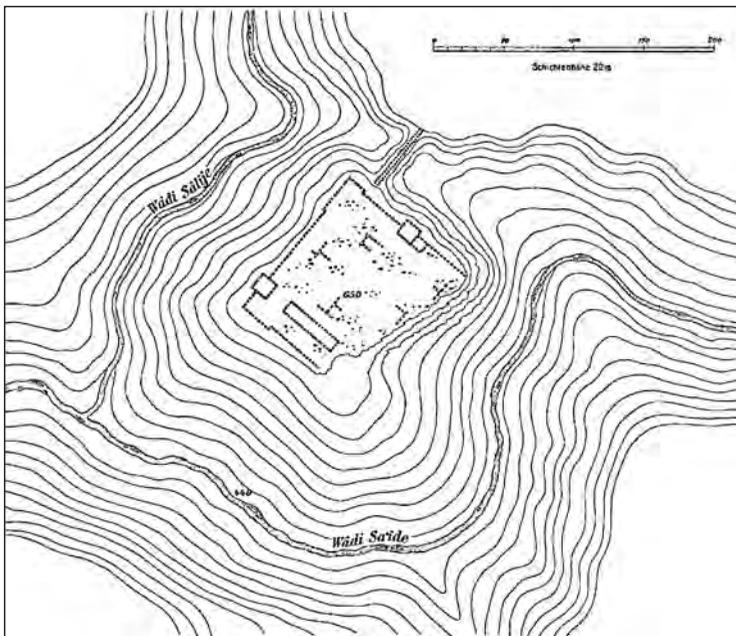


Fig. 3. Taken from Alois Musil, *Arabia Petraea* (Vienna: Holder, 1907–1908), 1: 328

The precise number of Arnon tributary wadis at el-M(u)deyyeneh es-Sāliyah is controversial, as is their precise configuration.<sup>122</sup> Nevertheless, several points seem clear:

122. The early reports speak of only two wadis; see Musil, *Arabia Petraea*, 1: 328 fig. 151 (site plan), 329; idem, *Ḳuṣejr ‘Amra*, *Karte von Arabia Petraea*; and Nelson Glueck, “Explorations, I,” 36. It is puzzling, however, that Musil’s description of the configuration of the two wadis seems to contradict the site plan he gives one page ear-



1) the mountain is surrounded on at least three sides by at least two wadis: W. Sa'ideh and W. Sāliyah; 2) if there are additional wadis next to the mountain, they are tributaries of these two; 3) virtually all of the rainwater that runs off and through the mountain ends up at the confluence of these two wadis.

If Hacothen's identification of **נְהַב** is correct, the phrase **אֶשֶׁר הַנְּחָלִים** must refer to the confluence of W. Sa'ideh and W. Sāliyah, including 1) the spot at the foot of the mountain where, during and after a rainstorm, the torrent of the latter wadi pours into the torrent of the former, and 2) the combined torrent that flows from that spot.<sup>123</sup>

A few kilometers to the west of that point there is a spring called *ʿAin es-Sa'ideh*, "Spring of the Joyous One (fem.)."<sup>124</sup> From that point westward, Musil reports, W. Sa'ideh always has water.<sup>125</sup> Musil's report implies that, east of the spring, W. Sa'ideh gives the appearance of being completely dried up during the summer, but that appearance is, no doubt, deceiving. The presence of a spring would seem to indicate that W. Sa'ideh has a stream running underground, on a layer of stone, for at least part of the year. The well of the chieftains would have been located in that wadi, at a spot—west of the mountain—where the underground stream would be just below the surface following the kind of torrential rainstorm (**סוּפָה**) mentioned in the poem.

This analysis explains the verbal connection between the well called **מְתִנָּה**, "gift," and the nearby mountain called **נְהַב**, "giver." The former was fed by the water that ran down and trickled through the latter during and after every rainstorm. If so, our verse is reminiscent of a well-known (but frequently misquoted and misinterpreted) remark by Herodotus (2.5): "The Egypt to which the Greeks sail [= the Delta] is land acquired by the Egyptians and a gift of the river (δῶρον τοῦ ποταμοῦ)."<sup>126</sup> In both cases, the raw material for one topographical feature is supplied by another topographical feature as a "gift." A mountain supplies water for a well, and a river supplies silt for a delta. This analysis does not contradict **וּמִמְדִּבְרַת מְתִנָּה**, "a gift from the desert" because Mt. Waheb (unlike the well?) was located in the desert.

#### WAHEB AND THE DESERT OF KEDEMOTH

Hacothen's identification of **נְהַב** (modified as proposed here or not) fits perfectly with the location of the station described immediately before it in Num. 21:13: **מַעְבַּר אֲרִנּוֹן אֶשֶׁר בְּמִדְבָּר** **הַיַּצְא מִגְּבֹל הָאֲמֹרִי**, "across the Arnon, in the desert that juts out from the (eastern) border of the Amorites." Moreover, it fits perfectly with the prevailing identification of **קְדִמּוֹת**, "a gift from the desert" because Mt. Waheb (unlike the well?) was located in the desert.

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lier (fig. 3 above) as well as his map of the region (fig. 4 above). Moreover, both his description and his maps contradict a recent map by Hermann Wahle: *Palästina: Historisch-archäologische Karte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979), Blatt Süd, G10 (fig. 5 above). It shows the mountain surrounded almost completely by four wadis: W. Sa'ideh, W. T(u)rayyā (a tributary of W. Sa'ideh), W. Sāliyah, and a short unnamed tributary of W. Sāliyah.

123. For a description of the spot, see Musil, *Arabia Petraea*, 1: 247. For the double reference of **אֶשֶׁר הַנְּחָלִים**, see above.

124. For *as-Sa'idah* as an epithet of the pre-Islamic Arabian goddess al-'Uzzā, see Hashim al-Tawil, "Early Arab Icons: Literary and Archaeological Evidence for the Cult of Religious Images in Pre-Islamic Arabia" (abstract of diss., Univ. of Iowa, 1993), 141. For dedications to al-'Uzzā in Jordan, see *ibid.*, 132. For the location of the spring, see Musil's map (fig. 4 above). Musil reports (*Arabia Petraea*, 1: 247) that it took him two and a half hours (from 6:13 to 8:44 pm) to walk from 'Ain es-Sa'ideh to the confluence of W. Sa'ideh and W. Sāliyah, where Khirbet el-M(u)deyyeneh is located.

125. Musil, *Arabia Petraea*, 1: 11; cf. fig. 4 above. At some point, the name of the wadi changes to eṣ-Ṣ(u)fei, but there is no agreement about where this happens. See Musil, *loc. cit.* vs. Glueck, "Explorations, I," 36.

126. J. Gwyn Griffiths, "Hecataeus and Herodotus on 'A Gift of the River,'" *JNES* 25 (1966): 57–58. Cf. Herodotus's repetition of the idea in 2.15: "Thus the Delta . . . is land deposited by the river and . . . has only lately appeared" (*ibid.*, 59).

the place from which Moses sent emissaries to Sihon (Deut. 2:26). Since many deserts in the Bible are named after adjacent towns (e.g., *מְדִבְרַת בְּאֵר שָׁבַע*), countries (e.g., *מְדִבְרַת מוֹאָב*), etc., it seems clear that *קְדְמוֹת מְדִבְרַת* takes its name from the town of *קְדְמוֹת* (Josh. 13:18, 1 Chr. 6:64). That town, whose name means “eastern parts,” is often identified with modern Khirbet es-Sāliyah,<sup>127</sup> which is situated “right on the western edge” of the desert<sup>128</sup> and around five kilometers north northwest of Khirbet el-M(u)deyyeneh es-Sāliyah.<sup>129</sup> According to this reconstruction, Mt. Waheb is located in the southwestern corner of the Desert of Kedemoth. The latter (probably part of the Syrian Desert) is the desert alluded to in the phrases *בְּמִדְבָּר* *וּמִמְדִּבְרַת מִתְּנָה* and *הַיִּצָּא מִגְּבֹל הָאֲמֹרִי*.

Further support for Hacothen’s theory comes from Israel Eph’al’s discussion of the Hebrew ethnonym *בְּנֵי־קְדֵם* and the Egyptian toponym *Qdm*, attested in the story of Sinuhe (Middle Kingdom):

[*Qdm*] refers to a region on the western border of the Syrian desert . . . The prophetic literature tends to use the term People of the East rather than the term “Arabs” in reference to the nomads of the Syro-Arabian desert . . .<sup>130</sup>

According to the *Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae*, there is a second occurrence of the toponym *Qdm* in a Middle Kingdom inscription.<sup>131</sup> There it has the plural sign, paralleling the plural ending of *קְדְמוֹת*.

All of this suggests that 1) Egyptian Qedem, “the region on the western border of the Syrian desert,” included *קְדְמוֹת מְדִבְרַת*; and 2) *קְדְמוֹת מְדִבְרַת* was inhabited by *בְּנֵי־קְדֵם*, at least some of whom spoke an ANA dialect. Thus, if *וְהַב* was in *קְדְמוֹת מְדִבְרַת*, it is easy to explain why *וְהַב* has an ANA name, exhibiting no shift from *ā* to *ō* or from initial *w* to *y*.<sup>132</sup>

In a recently published ANA inscription from Bāyir, a remote desert site in southeastern Jordan not terribly distant from Waheb, we find the author asking Milkom, Kemosh, and Qaws to protect his cisterns/reservoir.<sup>133</sup> The inscription, which invokes the gods of Ammon, Moab, and Edom and switches to the Canaanite script at the end, sheds light upon the cultural and religious ties binding North-Arabian-speaking denizens of Qedem to their Northwest-Semitic-speaking neighbors. The editors date the text to the first century BCE, but they do not explain the basis for this dating.

127. Zyl, *Moabites*, 74–75; John L. Peterson, “A Topographical Surface Survey of the Levitical ‘Cities’ of Joshua 21 and I Chronicles 6” (diss., Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, 1977), 671–86; idem, “Kedemoth,” *ABD* 4: 10–11; Robert G. Boling, “Levitical Cities: Archaeology and Texts,” in *Studies . . . Samuel Iwry*, 25; Dearman, “Levitical Cities,” 55, 63; Mittmann, “Gebietsbeschreibung,” 2: 20; MacDonald, “*East of the Jordan*,” 95; Hacothen, *וְהַב בְּסוּפֵרָה*, 16.

128. Peterson, “Topographical,” 679 = “Kedemoth,” 10.

129. See Ji and Lee, “Preliminary Report,” 557; Glueck, “Explorations, I,” 36; and Figs. 1, 4, and 5 above.

130. Eph’al, *Ancient Arabs*, 10.

131. For a different reading, see John Coleman Darnell, “The Eleventh Dynasty Royal Inscription from Deir el-Ballas,” *Revue d’Égyptologie* 59 (2008): 89, 94.

132. Another possibility is that the name Waheb originated with Midianites. For the view that there were Midianites in the Syrian Desert east of Moab, see G. M. Landes, “Midian,” *IDB* 3: 375a; Yehudah Elitzur and Yehuda Kiel, *אֲטֵלֶס רֵעֵת מִקְרָא* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1998), 99; and Ben David, “Mudayna Sites.”

133. Hani Hayajneh et al., “Die Götter von Ammon, Moab und Edom in einer neuen frühnordarabischen Inschrift aus Südost-Jordanien,” in *Fünftes Treffen der Arbeitsgemeinschaft Semitistik in der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, ed. V. Golinets et al. (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2015), 79–105.

## ANCIENT TOURISM

The similarity between “On account of that, it is said in the Book of the Wars of the Lord, ‘Come to (Mt.) Waheb’” and “On account of that, the bards say, ‘Come to Heshbon’” calls for an explanation. It appears that the ancient bards, when recounting the history of a people, would urge their audiences, present and future, to visit sites that are central to that history. Numbers 21 contains two excerpts that begin with exhortations of the form “Come to GN.”

Similar exhortations are issued by the prophets, in prose or (more often) poetry, on behalf of the Lord. In several cases, the audience is urged to go on a fact-finding trip: “לְכוּ-נָא אֶל-מְקוֹמִי אֲשֶׁר בָּשִׁילוּ אֲשֶׁר שָׁכַנְתִּי שְׁמִי שָׁם בְּרֵאשׁוֹנָה וְרָאוּ אֶת אֲשֶׁר-עָשִׂיתִי לוֹ מִפְּנֵי רָעַת עַמִּי יִשְׂרָאֵל” “Go to my place at Shiloh, where I formerly caused my name to dwell, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of my people, Israel” (Jer. 7:12); “עֲבְרוּ אֵי כַתְיִים וְרָאוּ וְקָדְר שְׁלָחוּ” “Cross over to the isles of the Kittim and see, send to Kedar and observe carefully; see if anything like this has ever happened” (Jer. 2:10); “עֲבְרוּ כַלְנֵה וְרָאוּ” “Cross over to Calneh and see, go from there to Great Hamath, and go down to Gath of the Philistines: Are they better than these kingdoms (Israel and Judah)?” (Amos 6:2).<sup>134</sup> In one instance, they are urged to make a pilgrimage: “בֵּית-אֵל וּפְשַׁעוּ הַגִּלְגָּל הַרְבוּ לְפִשַׁע” “Come to Bethel and transgress; at Gilgal multiply transgression” (Amos 4:4). Here, in an appeal dripping with sarcasm, pilgrimage to the shrines of northern Israel is portrayed as a kind of vice tourism. In these examples, too, the exhortation begins with the imperative of a verb of motion (“go,” “come,” “cross over”) followed immediately by the name of a destination serving, in the poetic examples, as the direct object of the verb.<sup>135</sup>

What was the Israelite audience supposed to see and feel at the sites mentioned in Num. 21:14–20? For a general answer, we may turn to an exhortation, attested twice in Psalms (with minor variations), that partially resembles the exhortations discussed above: “לְכוּ-חִזּוּ/וְרָאוּ מַפְעָלוֹת ה'” “Go (and) see the works of the Lord/God” (46:9, 66:5).

A more specific answer is available for the toponyms connected with Balak: “זְכֹר-נָא מִה-יַעֲזֵב בָּלָק מֶלֶךְ מוֹאָב ... לִמְעַן דַּעַת צְדָקוֹת ה'” “remember what Balak plotted . . . in order to (come to) know the righteous acts of the Lord” (Mic. 6:5).<sup>136</sup> In Josh. 24:9, the verb “יִלְחָם” is used of Balak’s plot, proving that the latter is worthy of mention among “מְלַחְמֵי ה'”.

The “mighty canyons” (נַחְלֵי-אֵל) near the eastern shore of the Dead Sea, major tourist attractions to this day, demonstrate the Lord’s awesome power with no obvious connection to war. The feelings that they were supposed to evoke are expressed by Baruch Levine:

After visiting Nahal Zered and Nahal Yabboq on a trip to Jordan, I realized that these were both great gorges, mighty canyons that are overpowering in their height, depth and massiveness, whereas the actual streams that run through them are small and unremarkable. Crossing them on the ground was and remains to this day a formidable feat. Accordingly, I decided to change my translation of Hebrew *nahal* to “gorge” in these cases, so as to convey the sense of wonderment that I had experienced.<sup>137</sup>

134. For the rendering “Are *they* better?” in the last passage, see Meir Weiss, *ספר עמורס* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1992), 1: 193, 2: 355 nn. 57–62. The usual interpretation (“Are *you* better?”; cf. Judg. 11:25) is less compatible with the language of the verse.

135. See n. 31 above.

136. For the referent of “צְדָקוֹת ה'”, see Francis I. Andersen and David N. Freedman, *Micah* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 523: “His victories in the holy wars of Israel’s beginnings (Judg. 5:10)” [5:11].

137. Levine, *Numbers 21–36*, 91.



Fig. 6. Nahal Arnon near the Dead Sea. Photo courtesy of Kaiti Fasburg (<https://birdsoftheairtravel.com>)

At the beginning of our excerpt, each member of the audience is urged to come during a storm to Mt. Waheb and the Arnon tributary wadis around it. We can perhaps imagine the impression left upon an ancient visitor by such an experience with the help of an inscription of Sargon II, which tells of crossing mountains “into which gullies of torrential water (*natbakāt mē dannūti*) were carved, the roar of whose rushing water resounded like thunder for one double mile around.”<sup>138</sup> Similarly, Israelite visitors who stood on or near Mt. Waheb during a torrential downpour would have seen the clash of raging torrents at the confluence next to it and heard a thunderous roar, as described in Isa. 29:6. They would no doubt have found the experience awe-inspiring, a manifestation of the Lord’s terrible might. They might even have recalled the description in the Song of Deborah (Judg. 5:21; cf. Ps. 83:10, 16) of a flash flood in Wadi Kishon sweeping away their enemies.

At first glance, it is tempting to compare a visit to the confluence of the wadis at Mt. Waheb with pilgrimages to river confluences in ancient India. However, there are numerous differences. One of them is that, in India, confluences were (and still are) considered sacred—not merely awe-inspiring. Thus, “in the list of sacred sites enumerated in the *Mahābhārata*, river confluences (*sangama*) are constantly mentioned. Among them, the most important is the confluence between the Gangā and the Yamunā.”<sup>139</sup> This confluence, located at modern Allahabad, “seems to be referred to in one of the verses of the Rig Veda, which says, ‘Those who bathe at the place where the two rivers, white and dark, flow together, rise up to heaven’ (Rig Veda X.75 [khila, supplementary verse]).”<sup>140</sup> By contrast, there is no reason to believe that the confluence of the wadis was considered sacred by the Israelites or that a visit by Israelites to the confluence of the wadis would be viewed as a religious pilgrimage. In that respect, at least, it was closer to modern sightseeing at river confluences<sup>141</sup> and, more generally, to ancient Greek sightseeing, as described and practiced by Herodotus.<sup>142</sup>

As for the well of the chieftains, it, too, was out of the ordinary. This is implicit not only in v. 16 but also in v. 18. The well, located in a spot selected by the Lord, did not require digging by laborers. It yielded water during the groundbreaking, claim-staking ceremony—a ceremony performed by chieftains with the ancient equivalent of scepters. Our study has shown that this well, which provided water to the Israelites during the time of the Lord’s wars with Sihon and Og, is presented in Num. 21 as a sight well worth seeing. As such, it is reminiscent of the well of Ramesses II celebrated in the Quban Stela and the Aksha Inscription.<sup>143</sup> That well, too—having been dug in a spot selected by the king and having saved the

138. See François Thureau-Dangin, *Une relation de la huitième campagne de Sargon* (Paris: Geuthner, 1912), 50–51 ll. 325–26, as corrected by CAD N/2, 117; and CAD Š/3, 123.

139. Chiara Letizia, “The Sacred Confluence, between Nature and Culture,” in *Nature, Culture and Religion at the Crossroads of Asia*, ed. Marie Lecomte-Tilouine (New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2010), 346–47.

140. Ankur Goswami, “Pilgrimage as Imagined Site: A Study of Prayag Tirtha,” *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage* 4 (2016): 18. This confluence and others in India and Nepal are still important pilgrimage centers; see *ibid.*, 16; and Letizia, “Sacred Confluence,” 345–46.

141. See, for example, Vanessa Barbara, “Please Don’t Punch the Dolphins,” *New York Times*, April 22, 2017, p. A19: “The ‘encontro das águas’ (meeting of waters) between the dark Negro River and the light-brown Solimões River is impressive. No wonder it’s one of the main tourist attractions near the City of Manaus, capital of the state of Amazonas . . . When the Negro and the Solimões finally merge, they form the Amazon . . .”

142. See *Herodotus, with an English translation*, ed. A. D. Godley (London: Heinemann, 1921–25), 2: 172–73 (3.139): “When Cambyses, son of Cyrus, invaded Egypt, many Greeks came with the army to that country, some to trade, as was natural, and some to see the country itself (ἀντῆς τῆς χώρας θεωρεῖν) (emphasis added). See also James Redfield, “Herodotus the Tourist,” *Classical Philology* 80 (1985): 97–118.

143. Benedict G. Davies, *Egyptian Historical Inscriptions of the Nineteenth Dynasty* (Jonsered: Åström, 1997), 233–44; K. A. Kitchen, *Ramesseid Inscriptions Translated & Annotated: Translations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993–2014), 2: 188–93.



