Thoughts on a New Book on Tanakh

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Rabbi Hayyim Angel is National Scholar of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. He is a member of the Bible Faculty at Yeshiva University, where has been teaching for many years.

Foreword to Yoel Elitzur, *Places in the Parasha*[1]

> If you seek it as you do silver and search for it as for [buried] treasures, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and attain knowledge of God. (Prov. 2:4–5)

When learning Tanakh with the literary-theological method,[2] certain elements become primary. Others lend themselves less to this type of analysis and religious exploration. To cite a familiar example, one learning the Book of Joshua likely will focus on the gripping narratives of chapters 1–12 and then skip to chapters 22–24. Joshua's role as leader and his relationship to Moses' leadership, the balance between God's intervention and human efforts, the reenactment of the covenant, the thorny question of war against the Canaanites, and many other vital religious and human issues dominate the discussion. The lengthy city lists in chapters 13–21 would receive scant attention at best, perhaps a few scattered bullet points. Further, the classical commentators do not offer extensive help expanding the middle chapters, since they generally were unaware of the geography of the Land of Israel.

Now imagine an entire book about those city list chapters, written by an expert in both the text of Tanakh and contemporary historical and archaeological scholarship. Imagine that book teaching a rigorous methodology in a clear accessible way that enlightens our understanding of Tanakh and strengthens our religious connection to the Land of Israel. Such a book would fill a monumental void in our learning. You are holding that book.

Professor Yoel Elitzur has made a remarkable contribution to religious Tanakh study precisely by focusing on the oft-neglected biblical places and names. Prof. Elitzur, who taught Tanakh for many years at Herzog College of Yeshivat Har Etzion and at Hebrew University, not only believes in the sanctity of Tanakh. He takes its historical relevance seriously.[3] Following in the venerable footsteps of his father

and teacher, Professor Yehuda Elitzur, *z”l* (1911–1997), Prof. Yoel Elitzur combines cutting-edge academic research with careful text analysis, bringing both together with rigor and religious passion.

One must wait until page 431 of this volume to hear Prof. Elitzur’s assessment of his contribution:

> This is a lonely task, as the classical commentators were not familiar with the land or with the extrabiblical sources, and many God-fearing students today who take interest in these matters believe that they should not pursue information or sources that were beyond the purview of the classical commentators. On the other hand, most scholars of biblical geography and history do not pay attention to what the Tanakh says about itself…We will read the Tanakh as it is written and attempt to understand what exactly it is saying, with the help of all the historical, geographical, archaeological, and linguistic tools available to us.

This volume provides the serious religious student of Tanakh with information and methodology that impact on many aspects of learning. In this foreword, I cite several representative examples of the types of contributions he makes.

In his study of *Parashat Bereshit*, Prof. Elitzur explores the role of the Euphrates River in Tanakh (pp. 6–10). One noteworthy point is his analysis of I Kings 5:4, which states that King Solomon “controlled the whole region beyond the River, from Tiphsah to Gaza.” In this verse, “beyond the River” clearly refers to the west of the Euphrates, where Israel is located. This verse, argues Prof. Elitzur, reflects a later geographical perspective introduced by the Assyrians (first evidenced in the writings of Sargon II, 722–705 BCE), who referred to the western nations of the Assyrian Empire as *eber nari*. Prior to the rise of the Assyrian Empire, Israel’s original perspective is that we are “here,” and “beyond the River” refers to nations *east* of the Euphrates (see Josh. 24:2–15; II Sam. 10:16). After the rise of the Assyrian Empire, Israel adopted the Assyrian-centric perspective and referred to the Land of Israel as “beyond the River,” that is, *west* of the Euphrates.[4] This later point of reference appears thirteen times in the Book of Ezra. Returning to the verse pertaining to King Solomon’s reign, it appears that this perspective reflects the time of the later prophetic author (traditionally Jeremiah; see Bava Batra 15a), rather than the time of Solomon, who ruled prior to the eighth century BCE. In Solomon’s time, the Israelites would not yet have referred to the Land of Israel as “beyond the River.”

Prof. Elitzur does not often engage in direct “know how to answer the heretic” (Mishna Avot 2:14) polemic. On occasion, however, he brings biblical and archaeological evidence to bear when there are popular misconceptions based on a misunderstanding of either the biblical text or archaeology. In his analysis of the proper identification of the Ai (pp. 18–36), for example, Prof. Elitzur surveys the biblical evidence for clues on locating the city vis-à-vis Bethel. It should be located just east of Bethel. And indeed, just over one mile east of Bethel’s probable location, a large tell was discovered. Known by Arabs as Khirbet et-Tell (the ruins of the tell), it appeared to be the perfect location to unearth Ai. In the 1930s, analysis of archaeological findings suggested that et-Tell was a highly fortified city that was destroyed by

fire in approximately 2100 BCE, long before Abraham. After that, the city lay in ruins except for a brief period prior to the founding of Israel's monarchy when an unfortified village was settled on top of the destroyed city. The scholarly conclusion, therefore, was that Joshua would have found an uninhabited city in ruins. Although this conclusion cast doubt on the veracity of the battle account in the Book of Joshua (chs. 7–8), Prof. Elitzur argues that even a superficial reading of the biblical passages illustrates that the Ai was a tiny town. Et-Tell, in contrast, reveals a large city. In all likelihood, et-Tell is *not* the location of the biblical Ai. The biblical Ai would be somewhere else in the vicinity of Khirbet et-Tell, and has not yet been unearthed in archaeological digs. Thus, there is no conflict between the biblical account and the current state of archaeological scholarship.

In his essay on *Parashat Vayishla?* (pp. 84–95), Prof. Elitzur weighs in on a controversy surrounding the traditional site of Joseph's tomb in Shechem, which was vandalized by Arabs in 1996 and again in 2000. In the 1980s and '90s, several Israelis, often motivated by their political viewpoints, asserted through various media that this gravesite was merely a tomb of a Muslim Sheikh named Yusuf who lived some two hundred years ago. Prof. Elitzur responds that the site has been known and venerated for thousands of years. He surveys ancient and medieval writings that identify the site, and couples that with an analysis of archaeological findings to support his conclusion.

Prof. Elitzur is equally equipped to debunk unfounded folk traditions. A recent Jewish tradition marks two graves near Zorah as those of Samson and his father Manoah. This identification, however, is specious (p. 422). Samson was buried "*between* Zorah and Eshtaol" (Judges 16:31), whereas these two graves are adjacent to Zorah itself.

Prof. Elitzur even ventures occasionally into the realm of halakha. For example, cities surrounded by walls at the time of Joshua must observe Purim on the fifteenth day of Adar. What cities were surrounded by walls at that time? Prof. Elitzur provides archaeological evidence to contribute to this discussion (pp. 373–85).

In his study on *Parashat Masei* (pp. 531–52), Prof. Elitzur examines a halakhic debate between Rambam and Ramban. Rambam follows the talmudic ruling that all forty-eight Levite cities served as cities of refuge. Ramban adopts the plain sense of the texts of the Torah and the Book of Joshua and insists that only six Levite cities served as cities of refuge.

Rather than simply concluding that Ramban is closer to the plain sense of the Torah and Joshua, Prof. Elitzur observes that in the parallel list of Levite cities in I Chronicles 6, there is a different formulation from the list in Joshua. For example, the Book of Joshua lists Hebron as a Levite city that became a city of refuge: "But to the descendants of Aaron the priest they assigned Hebron – the city of refuge for manslayers – together with its pastures, Libnah with its pastures, Jattir with its pastures, Eshtemoa with its pastures…" (Josh. 21:13–14). It is clear that Hebron is the city of refuge, and the other Levite cities are not cities of refuge. Ramban has *peshat*.

Contrast the parallel passage in Chronicles: "To the sons of Aaron they gave the cities of refuge: Hebron and Libnah with its pasturelands, Jattir and Eshtemoa with its pasturelands…" (I Chr. 6:42). This passage uses the term *cities* of refuge, suggesting that *all* of these Levite cities served as cities of refuge. Rambam has *peshat*!

The same contrast between city and cities occurs with Shechem:

> They were given, in the hill country of Ephraim, Shechem – the *city* of refuge for manslayers – with its pastures, Gezer with its pastures… (Josh. 21:21)

> They gave them the *cities* of refuge: Shechem with its pasturelands in the hill country of Ephraim, Gezer with its pasturelands… (I Chr. 6:52)

Prof. Elitzur suggests that Chronicles reflects the reality in a later period, when all Levite cities served as cities of refuge based on a special enactment or custom. He quotes several relevant rabbinic and other ancient sources to support this thesis. In the final analysis, Ramban reflects *peshat* in the Torah and Joshua, which was likely the original law. Rambam reflects *peshat* in Chronicles, which was likely the law followed some generations later.

My favorite analyses encompass several essays that explore the correlation between enthusiastic desire to inherit the Land of Israel and the inheritance of that land. In his essay on *Parashat Pin?as* (pp. 502–14), Prof. Elitzur explores a curious feature regarding the inheritance of the daughters of Tzlofhad. Because Manasseh and Ephraim were born in Egypt, we do not learn of their family branches until the census in the fortieth year of the wilderness:

> These were the descendants of Gilead: [Of] Iezer, the clan of the Iezerites; of Helek, the clan of the Helekites; [of] Asriel, the clan of the Asrielites; [of] Shechem, the clan of the Shechemites; [of] Shemida, the clan of the Shemidaites; [of] Hepher, the clan of the Hepherites. (Num. 26:31–33)

In sum, there are six family branches in Manasseh. The daughters of Tzlofhad are the granddaughters of Hepher, and presumably would split the portion that would have been assigned to Tzlofhad son of Hepher.

When the Book of Joshua describes the tribal inheritance of Manasseh, however, it identifies ten districts instead of the expected six:

> And this is the portion that fell by lot to the tribe of Manasseh…The descendants of Abiezer, Helek, Asriel, Shechem, Hepher, and Shemida…Now Tzlofhad son of Hepher son of Gilead son of Machir son of Manasseh had no sons, but only daughters…So, in accordance with the Lord’s instructions, they were granted a portion among their father’s kinsmen. *Ten districts* fell to Manasseh…as Manasseh’s daughters inherited a portion together with his sons, while the land of Gilead was assigned to

the rest of Manasseh's descendants. (Josh. 17:1–6)

From the simple reading of these verses, the five daughters of Tzlofhad each became independent districts in Manasseh, instead of simply all becoming part of Hepher's district! Why should they become their own districts, equal to those of their grandfather's generation? Prof. Elitzur quotes a midrashic resolution, that Tzlofhad amassed a total of five portions that he then bequeathed to his daughters. Alternatively, Malbim proposes that the ten districts in Manasseh are actually ten geographic portions not connected to the family tree.

However, it is far smoother to say that the daughters of Tzlofhad became independent districts. To support his reading, Prof. Elitzur quotes from the Samaria Ostraca that were discovered in 1910 in the treasury of the palace of the kings of Israel in ancient Samaria. Fifteen place names and seven clans appear in these documents. The seven clans are Shemida, Abiezer, Helek, [A]sriel, Shechem, Hoglah, and Noah. Hoglah and Noah were two of Tzlofhad's daughters. These districts were named after the family members, just as reported in Joshua 17. Evidently, the singular enthusiasm to inherit land displayed by the daughters of Tzlofhad elevated their rank within their tribe so that they ultimately received their own districts, unlike any of their male cousins from that generation.

In his essay on *Parashat Matot* (pp. 515–30), Prof. Elitzur continues the theme of the special enthusiasm to inherit the land exhibited by the tribe of Manasseh. He asks two basic questions: (1) Why does the half-tribe of Manasseh appear in Numbers 32 only as an afterthought? Why were they not included with Reuben and Gad from the beginning of their request of the eastern lands of Sihon and Og? (2) After the Israelites defeated Sihon, why did they then march north to confront Og in the Bashan (Num. 21:33)? They already had a clear entry path into the Land of Israel!

While yet in Egypt, the tribe of Manasseh named some of its children Gilead, Hepher, Shechem, and Tirzah. These are place-names in Manasseh's territory on both sides of the Jordan. These names expressed the wish of the tribe to return to their homeland, and evidently Manasseh considered territory on both sides of the Jordan home already during the nation's sojourn in Egypt.[5]

Building on the medieval rabbinic suggestions of a student of Rabbi Saadia Gaon and Rabbi Yehuda the Pious, Prof. Elitzur proposes that while the nation was still in Egypt, certain families from Manasseh settled parts of the Bashan. Throughout Israel's enslavement in Egypt, these Manassites remained in that territory and were there when Moses and the majority of the nation returned from Egypt. This hypothesis also accounts for the population explosion in Manasseh from the first year (32,200; see Num. 1:35) to the fortieth year (52,700; see Num. 26:34). Those who had left Egypt were joined by those living in Bashan.

Moses and the nation therefore marched north to Bashan, to greet and liberate their "sabra" brethren of Manasseh from the rule of Og. These Manassites also had nothing to do with Moses' deal with Reuben and Gad, since this land belonged to them from beforehand. The tribe of Manasseh earned this additional territory as a consequence of their enthusiasm to inherit the land.

Unlike the exceptional enthusiasm to inherit the land exhibited by the tribe of Manasseh, the tribe of Dan represents the opposite extreme. In his study of *Parashat Naso* (pp. 421–38), Prof. Elitzur explains that the tribe of Dan was lax in taking possession of the land, thereby squandering their assigned territory and forcing many of their members to find additional land to the north of Israel.

To support this thesis, Prof. Elitzur observes that the cities of Zorah and Eshtaol typically are associated with Dan. Samson, who hailed from the tribe of Dan, was active between these towns (Judges 13:25) and later was buried between these towns (16:31). Members of the tribe of Dan ventured from there to find new territory for Dan to occupy, and eventually conquered Laish in the north (18:2, 8, 11).

In the Book of Joshua, however, Zorah and Eshtaol are identified *both* with Judah and with Dan. With Judah: "In the Lowland: Eshtaol, Zorah, Ashnah…" (Josh. 15:33). With Dan: "Their allotted territory comprised: Zorah, Eshtaol, Ir-shemesh…" (19:41). To whom did these towns belong?

Although Dan was a large tribe, it was unable to conquer or hold land:

> But the territory of the Danites slipped from their grasp. So the Danites migrated and made war on Leshem. They captured it and put it to the sword; they took possession of it and settled in it. And they changed the name of Leshem to Dan, after their ancestor Dan. (Josh. 19:47)

> The Amorites pressed the Danites into the hill country; they would not let them come down to the plain. (Judges 1:34)

Further, the description of Dan's portion in Joshua chapter 19 is a list of cities, with no clearly defined borders. Prof. Elitzur explains this phenomenon by noting that the tribes of Judah, Ephraim, and Manasseh were quick to inherit their land and also dispossessed Canaanites from the surrounding regions. Consequently, they obtained this additional land.

Joshua supported the expansion of the tribes of Judah and Joseph, and encouraged the less active tribes to follow their lead:

> But there remained seven tribes of the Israelites which had not yet received their portions. So Joshua said to the Israelites, "How long will you be slack about going and taking possession of the land which the Lord, the God of your fathers, has assigned to you? Appoint three men of each tribe; I will send them out to go through the country and write down a description of it for purposes of apportionment, and then come back to me. They shall divide it into seven parts – Judah shall remain by its territory in the south, and the house of Joseph shall remain by its territory in the north." (Josh. 18:2–5)

By the time the tribe of Dan decided to become active, there was little territory left available for them. The tribes of Judah and Ephraim therefore allotted cities to them, without any contiguous land borders. We see a similar phenomenon with the tribe of Simeon, which occupied cities within the boundaries of Judah.

To round out this discussion, Prof. Elitzur surveys the varying accounts of the borders of the Land of Israel in his study on *Parashat Mishpatim* (pp. 208–19). There appear to be two different sets of borders enumerated. One border stretches all the way from the Euphrates to the River of Egypt or the Red Sea (e.g., Gen. 15:18; Ex. 23:31), and other borders that are smaller and do not stretch to the Euphrates or the Red Sea (e.g., Num. ch. 34). The history of Israel is based on the smaller borders, since the people are not considered to be in Israel immediately after crossing the Red Sea.

The smaller borders represent the first stage of the biblical program, as Israel's population would not have been large enough to settle in the greater borders. Joshua was tasked with conquering a territorial nucleus so that the nation could begin its life in the Land of Israel. The larger borders represent "potential holiness," that a religious and enthusiastic nation would be able to settle and sanctify over time.

Prof. Elitzur shines his spotlight on the oft-neglected areas of Tanakh. His approach calls to mind Ramban's words in his commentary on Genesis 35:16. The verse reads, "They set out from Bethel; but when they were still some distance short of Ephrath (*vayhi od kivrat haaretz lavo Efrata*), Rachel was in childbirth, and she had hard labor." Ramban composed his commentary in Spain, and he adopted Radak's interpretation of "when they were still some distance short" to mean the distance one may walk from morning until mealtime.

Toward the end of his life, however, Ramban moved to *Eretz Yisrael*, and updated this comment:

> That is what I wrote initially [while still in Spain – HA]. But now that I have merited coming to Jerusalem…I saw with my eyes that the distance between Rachel's tomb and Bethlehem is not even one *mil*. Therefore [my original] interpretation is refuted… But [the term means] a unit of distance, as Rashi had interpreted.

Prof. Elitzur is as uncompromising in his research as he is enthusiastic regarding his subject matter, which is wholy in addition to being academically rigorous. Prof. Elitzur has given us the opportunity to upgrade our understanding of many elements in Tanakh, rabbinic teachings, and even folk traditions. This volume enlightens our learning, and will foster a more profound love of the Land of Israel through intimate knowledge of the settings for the eternal prophetic narratives in Tanakh.

[1] This essay appeared originally as a Foreword to Yoel Elitzur, *Place in the Parasha: Biblical Geography and Its Meaning* (Jerusalem: Maggid Press, 2020), pp. xv-xxv.

[2] See especially Shalom Carmy, "A Room with a View, but a Room of Our Own," in *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah: Contributions and Limitations*, ed. Shalom Carmy (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1996), 1–38; Hayyim Angel, "The Literary-Theological Study of Tanakh," afterword to Moshe Sokolow, *Tanakh: An Owner's Manual: Authorship, Canonization, Masoretic Text, Exegesis, Modern Scholarship and Pedagogy* (Brooklyn, NY: Ktav, 2015), 192–207.

[3] For a particularly instructive example, Prof. Elitzur insists that the Pharaoh at the time of the Exodus was not Ramesses II, based on his acceptance of the chronological signpost in I Kings 6:1 which states that Solomon built the Temple 480 years from the Exodus (pp. 143–55).

[4] Prof. Elitzur notes the parallel to contemporary people living in the "Middle East" (synonymous with the "Near East") also referring to their lands as the Middle East, adopting the Eurocentric perspective of that term.

[5] In a similar vein, Prof. Elitzur (p. 165) observes that Moses' father Amram had a brother named Hebron (Ex. 6:18). Evidently, Hebron was named in Egypt after the city to express a profound longing for the people to return to the land of the Patriarchs. Once Joshua and the people entered Israel, this dream was fulfilled as Hebron became a Levite city and a city of refuge.