

“The Identification of Bethany Beyond the Jordan”

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One of the places where John the Baptist ministered is named in the Fourth Gospel as “Bethany beyond the Jordan” (Jn. 1:28). There Jesus was baptized by John and later ministered with His disciples (Jn. 10:40-42). Origen, who lived in Palestine in the 3rd century, suggested that the correct place-name in John 1:28 was “Bethabara,” a site he located on the west side of the Jordan. Many later manuscripts carry this suggestion. Since no site east of the Jordan has been identified as Bethany, Christian tradition has associated Bethany with Qasr el-Yehud west of the Jordan. John 1:28 has even been retranslated in such a way as to eliminate the site altogether. The identification of Bethany beyond the Jordan is without doubt a complicated geographical problem in the life of Christ.

Bethabara Not Bethany

The oldest solution to the problem of the identification of Bethany beyond the Jordan is set forth by Origen (A.D. 185-254) in his commentary on John. In commenting on John 1:28 Origen admits that the reading “Bethany” is found in almost all the manuscripts, but is convinced that the reading should be Bethabara. In support of this contention he argues that Bethany, the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus (Jn. 11:1, 5), is near Jerusalem, not the Jordan River. In addition, he declares that there is no other place by the name of Bethany in the vicinity of the Jordan. Having set aside “Bethany” he comments on John 1:28, “...but they say that Bethabara is pointed out on the banks of the Jordan, and that John is said to have

baptized there.”¹

Origen sees a correspondence between the etymology of the name Bethabara and the baptizing ministry of John, and believes that this lends support to his conclusion. He understands Bethabara to mean “house of preparation” signifying that John’s baptism prepared people for the coming of Jesus. Bethany, according to Origen, means “house of obedience,” which he sees as an unfitting description of the place of Jesus’ baptism.²

How should Origen’s conjecture be evaluated? We must remember that Origen followed the allegorical system of interpretation and applied that hermeneutic to the place-names of the Bible. He sees great significance in the name “Gergesa” which he interprets as meaning “dwelling of the casters-out,” and the name “Capernaum” which he interprets to mean “field of consolation.” Origen makes clear his allegorical interest in place-names when he writes, “For we know that the names of places agree in their meaning with the things connected with Jesus.”³ Origen’s chief interest in the site of John’s baptism seems to have been the allegorical explanation of the name. Since he recognized that the Bethany of John 1:28 could not be that Bethany near Jerusalem, and did not like the allegorical significance of “Bethany” (which seemed to suggest that Jesus was obedient to John), Origen sought another identification.

Another problem with Origen’s solution is the fact that he had no direct knowledge of the locality of his proposed site of John’s baptizing ministry. He writes, “...but they say that Bethabara is pointed out on the banks of the Jordan and

¹Origen, “Commentary on John,” in The Ante-Nicene Fathers, American ed., eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, 10 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1899), 9:370.

²Ibid., p. 371.

³Ibid., p. 387.

that John is said to have baptized there.”¹ Origen based his solution to the Bethany problem on hearsay! While he declares that there is no other place by the name “Bethany” near the Jordan, one wonders if he had ever surveyed the area himself. Origen’s lack of first-hand knowledge regarding the sites of Bethany and Bethabara certainly detracts from his proposed solution.

It has been suggested that Origen was influenced in his identification of the place of John’s baptism by the name “Beth-bara” (Judges 7:24), and a shortened form of Bethabarah (“ford-town”), situated considerably north of the traditional scene of John’s activity. If this was the case, Origen’s association of Beth-barah with the place of John’s baptism was based on a false location of Beth-barah in eastern Palestine. Clapp explains that Beth-barah (Judges 7:24) must have been on the west side of the Jordan River since the Ephraimites there cut off the passage of the Midianites. Origen was led astray by using the literal Septuagint translation of Judges 7:25 so that he understood that the Ephraimites brought the chief’s heads from Beth-barah, on the east side of the Jordan to Gideon in western Palestine, whereas he should have understood that the heads were brought from western Palestine across the Jordan to Gideon.² The incorrect location of Beth-barah in eastern Palestine probably helped Origen to make the connection with it and the place where John baptized.

That “Bethany beyond Jordan” is the original reading of John 1:28 is put beyond doubt by the overwhelming documentary evidence. “Bethany” is

¹Origen, “Commentary on John,” p. 370.

²Raymond G. Clapp, “A Study of Place-names Gergesa and Bethabara,” Journal of Biblical Literature 26 (1907): 78.

the earliest and most widely attested reading, supported by the Alexandrian, Caesarean, and Byzantine text-types. If Bethabara were original there would be no reason for it to be altered, while reasons have been given for changing Bethany to Bethabara. Yet, in spite of the weight of evidence against his conclusion, the reading “Bethabara” became current, owing to the advocacy of Origen. He was followed by Eusebius, Jerome, and the designer of the Madaba Map. Origen’s emendation is preserved today in the text of the King James Version.

Bethabara = Makhadet 'Abara

C. R. Conder, a British army officer who with H. H. Kitchener made a detailed survey of western Palestine from 1872 to 1877, has advanced the proposal of Origen by actually identifying Bethabara. Conder sees the name Bethabara preserved in the Arabic 'Abara, and identifies the site with Makhadet 'Abara just one mile north of the mouth of the Harod Valley. Conder suggests that Bethabara was a small hamlet in the vicinity of a ford on the Jordan. He suggests that part of this community may have been west and part east of the Jordan, thus accounting for the qualification, Bethabara “beyond Jordan.”¹

Though Conder considers it curious that the oldest manuscripts read “Bethany” instead of “Bethabara,” he excuses this by stating that the Judean Bethany would not be a fitting place for Jesus’ baptism, nor could it be described as in the region of the Jordan. In another paper Conder seeks to deal with the majority text of John 1:28 suggesting that “Bethany beyond the Jordan” is a reference to the well-known district of Bathanea,

¹C. R. Conder and H. H. Kitchener, The Survey of Western Palestine, 3 vols. (London: The Committee of the Palestine Exploration Fund, 1881-83), 2 (1882), pp. 89-90.

which has left traces of its name to the present day in the district called Ard el Bethanieh, “beyond Jordan.”¹

Since, according to Conder’s calculations, Jesus arrived in Cana of Galilee on the third day after the testimony of John concerning Jesus (Jn. 1:29, 35, 43; 2:1), he believes that any search for Bethabara should be confined to within 30 miles of Cana of Galilee (Khirbet Kana). Bethabara meets this requirement being located within 25 miles or an “easy two days” journey of Cana, and is situated near one of the principal northern fords of the Jordan. He states that the Arabic (Makhadet 'Abara) and Hebrew (Beth 'Abara) are equivalent terms, both meaning “ford of the crossing over.”² Conder reports that there are no traces of the village today, but rightly explains that it would be quite possible for the remains of such a hamlet to have completely eroded in 18 centuries.

There are some serious objections to Conder’s proposed solution to the Bethany problem. First, he bases his identification on a doubtful text, and this he even admits.³ Second, he incorrectly reckons the third day of John 2:1 as the day after the events of John 1:45-51 and therefore confines Bethabara to within 30 miles of Cana. The third day should be reckoned from Christ’s departure for Galilee (1:43) and thus the site of Bethany (Bethabara) could be as much as 70 miles from Cana. Third, Makhadet 'Abara is not east of the Jordan. Though he explains the phrase “beyond Jordan” as descriptive of the region of Batanea, it is more probable that it

¹C. R. Conder, “Bethany Beyond Jordan,” in The Survey of Western Palestine: Special Papers (London: The Committee of the Palestine Exploration Fund, 1881): 131-34.

²Conder and Kitchener, Survey of Western Palestine, 2:90.

³Ibid., 2:90.

distinguishes the place of the baptism from the Bethany near Jerusalem. Batanea in Transjordan needs no such qualifying phrase. Fourth, Makhadet 'Abara is at least one mile from the Jordan while Matt. 3:6 and Mk. 1:9 indicate that John was baptizing in the Jordan River. Fifth, it is unlikely that Jerusalem and all Judea would have gone out to be baptized if the site of John's baptizing ministry was as far north as Makhadet 'Abara. Sixth, the region of Makhadet 'Abara is too fertile for John 1:28 and the parallel passages. While "desert" (Matt. 3:1, Mk. 1:4) does not have to refer to a sandy, barren place, it would refer to an uncultivated locality, and the whole region from below the Harod Valley north to the Sea of Galilee was extensively cultivated. We must look for Bethany elsewhere.

Bethabara = Beth-nimrah

Sir George Grove has proposed that Bethabara, which he accepts as the correct reading of John 1:28, be identified with the Beth-nimrah of Joshua 13:37.¹¹ Beth-nimrah is located east of the Jordan River at Tell Nimrin northeast of Jericho. This identification is based on the fact that in the Septuagint translation of Joshua 13:27 (Codex B) Beth-nimrah has become Baithanabra, a name having the consonants n, b, and r after Beth. This name, it is suggested, might have been corrupted to either Bethany or Bethabara and so have given rise to both of these readings in John 1:28.

In favor of this view is the fact that the site would be easily accessible to those dwelling in Jerusalem and all Judea (Matt. 3:5; Mk. 1:5). In addition, the site is east of the Jordan as John 1:28 indicates it should be. Cheyne adopts this solution to the Bethany problem and proposes that

¹¹Dictionary of the Bible, ed. William Smith, s.v. "Beth-abara," by George Grove, 1:195-96.

the original reading in John 1:28 would be a place-name such as Bethanabra.¹ In favor of this solution Cheyne points out that the perennial stream (Wadi Shu'eib) would have supplied an abundance of water for John's baptizing ministry.

While the location of Beth-nimrah (Tell Nimrin) meets the geographical requirements of John 1:28 and the parallel passages, it is founded on precarious conjectural emendation. It is based upon a reading in the Septuagint which is believed to have been corrupted into the minority and majority readings found in the New Testament. There is, however, absolutely no manuscript evidence to support the view that the original reading in John 1:28 was Bethanabra. In addition, there would be no reason for the qualifying phrase "beyond the Jordan" (found in all manuscripts) had the place-name been something other than "Bethany." The qualifying phrase is included to distinguish the two Bethanys and would have been unnecessary had there been only one! While satisfying topographically, this view has little to commend it from the standpoint of textual evidence.

Bethany = Batneh

K. Furrer has suggested that the site of Bethany beyond the Jordan should be identified with Betâne (or Batneh) located in Transjordan up the Wadi Abu Muhair (which empties into the Jordan 9 miles northeast of Jericho) about an hour's journey northwest of es-Salt.² Furrer finds in Betâne the Arabized form of Betonim, the name of one of the cities of Gad (Joshua

¹Encyclopaedia Biblica, s.v. "Bethany," by T. K. Cheyne, 1:548.

²K. Furrer, "Das Geographische im Evangelium nach Johannes," Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft 3 (1902): 257-65.

13:26). He notes that in Byzantine lists of churches a locality, Bataneōs, is mentioned which is indicated by the sequence of passages to be near es-Salt. Furrer recognizes the objection that Bethany has a different “t” sound than Betonim or Betâne, but explains that strict normality cannot be expected when popular speech carries place-names into other languages. He suggests that Greek-speaking Christians might have transformed the name into “Bethany” because of their knowledge of the Judean Bethany.

In the spring of 1906 Benjamin W. Bacon inspected the site proposed by Furrer and was convinced of its importance during the Herodian period.¹ The name of the site given him by the natives of the area was not Betâne but Batneh, a place-name which he considers much closer to the Byzantine form. He describes the site as at least a five hour journey from the Jordan on a dry plateau 3,000 feet above the valley floor. While this seems too far from the Jordan for John’s baptizing ministry, Bacon observed the remains of a large rectangular pool or reservoir (150 x 75 feet) which he suggests may represent John’s baptismal font.

While Furrer has correctly identified the Old Testament site of Betonim (Josh. 13:26) with Khirbet Batneh, the shift in the name from “Betonim” to “Bethany,” and then to “Batneh” is improbable. According to Kampffmeyer’s rules of transmission the name could pass from the Hebrew Betonim to the Arabic Batneh (leaving the Teth unchanged), but not to Bethany which has an aspirated “t” (th) sound.² In addition, the site is too far from the Jordan to qualify as the site of John’s baptizing ministry,

¹Benjamin W. Bacon, “The Baptism of John—Where was it?” The Biblical World 30 (1907): 47-48.

²Aharoni, The Land of the Bible, pp. 108-12.

for he clearly baptized his disciples in the river (Matt. 3:6; Mk. 1:5, 9).

Bethany = Et-Tell

Benjamin B. Warfield believes that Bethany should be located in the vicinity of the Sea of Galilee, far north of its traditional site opposite Jericho. He identifies Bethany with et-Tell, a site just north-east of the Sea of Galilee which is often identified with Bethsaida-Julias. According to Seetzen's "Gaulonitish Guide," cited by Warfield, et-Tell was known as "Anihje" which is similar to "Beth-Anihje" or "Bethany."¹

In support of his conclusion, Warfield reconstructs the narrative of John chapter one seeking to demonstrate that et-Tell is the probable location of Bethany. Warfield first notes that at Bethany Jesus is no longer surrounded by Jerusalemites of the earlier period, but by Galileans. Tracing the narrative of John 1:29—2:1 Warfield observes that on the day after John announced Jesus as the Lamb of God (Jn. 1:29), Andrew and Peter became associated with Jesus (Jn. 1:35-41). Both of these young men were from Bethsaida (Jn. 1:44), located near the Sea of Galilee. On the next day Jesus found Philip, also of Bethsaida (Jn. 1:44), and later on the same day Philip brought Nathanael, who was from Cana of Galilee (Jn. 1:45; 21:2). Basically, Warfield sees a Galilean emphasis in Christ's first contacts with His disciples and believes that this would not be the case if Bethany were situated further south near Jericho.

While Warfield's proposed identification of the site of Bethany is "beyond the Jordan," that is about all there is to commend it. While it is true that the first disciples of Jesus

¹Benjamin B. Warfield, "The Scenes of the Baptist's Work," The Expositor 23 (1885) : 273-77.

were Galileans (Jn. 1:44, 21:2), this does not force us to conclude that John's ministry was in northern Galilee. All indications are that the place of his ministry was accessible to the people of Jerusalem and Judea (Matt. 3:5; Mk. 1:5). In addition, the clear teaching of the gospel narratives is that Jesus journeyed from Galilee (Matt. 3:13; Mk. 1:9) to the Jordan for His baptism by John, and then returned to Galilee (Jn. 1:43). Warfield mistakenly interprets the "third" day as the day after the events of John 1:45-51. On that basis the writer should have said the fourth day, for preceding it are not two "morrrows" but three (John 1:29, 35, 43). The gospel writer undoubtedly has reference to the third day after Jesus' departure for Galilee. While et-Tell may have been called "Anihji," Conder declares that this name could not represent Bethany because the "h" and "j" are radicals which have no equivalents in the Greek "Bethany."¹ As will be seen later, et-Tell is a more probable site for Bethsaida-Julias.

Two Bethanys As One

The solution offered by Pierson Parker to the Bethany problem is to identify the Bethany of John 1:28 with the familiar Bethany near Jerusalem thus eliminating "Bethany beyond the Jordan" altogether. He begins by retranslating John 1:28 to read, "These things took place in Bethany, which is across from the point of the Jordan where John had been baptizing."² Parker concludes that the events of John 1:15-51 all took place at Bethany, and then asserts that everything the author says about this Bethany fits the town near Jerusalem. There were fig trees (Jn. 1:48, 50), a Jerusalem

¹Conder, "Bethany Beyond Jordan," p. 132.

²Pierson Parker, "Bethany Beyond Jordan," Journal of Biblical Literature 74 (1955): 258.

delegation (Jn. 1:29), an unnamed disciple whose home was close enough for Jesus' mother to get there from the cross (Jn. 1:40; 19:27), and lodgings to which Jesus could invite guests (Jn. 1:39). Parker understands the events of John 1:15-51 as taking place during a recess, following the baptizing activities at the Jordan. The author of the gospel is saying that prior to these events in Bethany, John had baptized in the Jordan.¹ Parker then proceeds to deal with the expression "beyond the Jordan." He quotes classical writers to support his view that peran may denote "across from, opposite, over against." The Fourth Gospel, then, tells us that Bethany is opposite or across from where John had baptized in the Jordan. He suggests that reference to a map will verify the fact that Bethany is just across from the south end of the Jordan River, the traditional site of John the Baptist's ministry.²

At first glance, Parker's solution to the Bethany problem appears to have much to commend it. To his credit, Parker deals with the biblical text and does not resort to conjectural emendation. He recognizes that the reading "Bethany" is supported by the best manuscript evidence. His solution accounts for the traditional site of John the Baptist's ministry at the Jordan just north of the Dead Sea and yet helpfully eliminates the problem of having to find a Bethany in that locality. However, while Parker's proposal appears credible, it is not without serious objection.

In the first place, there would be no need for the qualifying phrase, "beyond the Jordan," if there had been only one city by the name of Bethany. Since Bethany was a well known city near Jerusalem (Matt. 21:17; 26:6; Mk. 11:1, 11, 12; 14:3) there would be no reason to describe

¹Ibid., pp. 259-60.

²Ibid., p. 260.

its location. By describing its location with reference to the Jordan and the ministry of John, the writer seems to be distinguishing it from the other Bethany of his gospel (Jn. 11:1, 18; 12:1). Secondly, Parker asserts that everything said about Bethany fits the town near Jerusalem, implying that the details would not fit a town near the Jordan. However, fig trees (Jn. 1:48, 50) may have grown near the Jordan even as date palms and balsam trees grew in the Jordan Valley near Jericho.¹ Also, it would not be surprising to have the delegation of religious officials journey as far as the Jordan, for a similar delegation of Scribes traveled to Galilee to investigate Jesus' miracles there (Mk. 3:22). Parker's suggestion that it would be unlikely for Jesus to have had lodgings in the wilderness near the Jordan contradicts the clear statement of John 10:40-42 which indicates that later in His ministry Jesus was staying where John was first baptizing. There must have been a sizable community at that baptismal site. Parker's implication that the narrative of John 1:15-51 fits the locale of Bethany near Jerusalem rather than a site near the Jordan cannot be sustained.

Another objection to Parker's position is the improbability of describing the Bethany near Jerusalem with reference to the Jordan where John had been baptizing. The Jordan is about 20 miles east of Bethany "as the crow flies." It seems quite unlikely that John would have described Bethany with reference to a site 20 miles away. The common people were not so blessed with maps in ancient times as to be able to see the relationship between the two sites. In addition, it is probable that many of John's readers would not have been sufficiently familiar with the land to relate the site of John's baptizing ministry at the Jordan to Bethany near Jerusalem.

¹Avi-Yonah, The Holy Land (1966), p. 197.

Parker has also evidently overlooked the fact that Jesus is said to have returned again to the place where John was first baptizing (Jn. 10:40). This text clearly indicates that Jesus had been there before (see also Jn. 3:26). The clear indication of the Fourth Gospel is that Jesus was at the baptismal site in 1:28-51 and returned again to that site after an attempt on His life at the Feast of Dedication (Jn. 10:22-40).

In addition to these contextual objections to Parker's solution, his translation of John 1:28 is questionable. The translation indicates that the Baptist's work had ceased, while the present tenses (Jn. 1:25, 26, 28) indicate that it continued. The idea that the events of John 1:15-51 took place at a recess following the baptizing activities at the Jordan cannot be sustained from the context.

Parker asserts dogmatically that with einai and ginesthai the preposition peran does not mean "beyond" but "across from, opposite, over against," (Jn. 1:28).¹ His conclusion is that Bethany is opposite from where John had baptized in the Jordan. However, a brief glance at a standard Greek lexicon will demonstrate that the primary meaning of peran is "on the other side" or "across."² This is especially true when used of things done on the opposite side of a body of water. Examples of this usage are frequent in classical literature. Xenophon writes, "Many heads of cattle had been captured while they were being taken across to the other side (peran) of the river."³ Liddell and Scott do give examples where peran

¹Parker, "Bethany Beyond Jordan," p. 260.

² A Greek-English Lexicon by Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, s.v. Peran, p. 1365.

³ Xenophon Anabasis III. v. 2. See also IV. iii. 24; VII. ii. 2.

means “opposite” or “over against,” but these are relatively few.¹ In the New Testament the preposition answers the question “whither” or “where” (Matt. 19:1; Mk. 5:1; Jn. 1:28; 3:26; 6:1, 22, 25).² In a number of places the phrase “beyond the Jordan” functions as the designation for the territory on the other side of the Jordan—that is Perea (Matt. 4:15, 25; Mk. 3:8; 10:1; Jn. 3:26). Considering the regular New Testament usage of peran and the fact that it is often used as a part of a phrase meaning Perea, it seems best to interpret John as referring to a site beyond the Jordan rather than a point across from the Jordan where John had been baptizing. In support of this conclusion it is clear from John 3:26 that Jesus was with John beyond the Jordan and the only previous time this association would fit into John’s gospel would be in John 1:28-51. While I appreciate Parker’s novel approach to the Bethany problem, the deficiencies of his arguments weigh heavily against his proposed solution.

Steps Toward A Solution

William Foxwell Albright suggests that the geographer must consider five aspects of any topographical problem: (1) criticism of the written sources in which ancient place-names occur; (2) approximate location of sites from documentary indications; (3) toponymy, or the analysis of place-names and their linguistic transmission; (4) archaeological indications; and (5) the evidence of tradition.³ While it may not be

¹ Homer *Iliad* II. 535; Pausanias: Description of Greece II. ii. 2.

² A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, trans. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, 4th rev. ed., s.v. Peran, p. 649.

³ William F. Albright, “The Rediscovery of the Biblical World,” in The Westminster Historical Atlas to the Bible, revised ed., ed. G. E. Wright and F. V. Filson (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956), p. 14.

possible to determine the exact location of the site of Bethany, the application of Albright's principles of site identification will enable us to suggest the general vicinity of the ford community where John baptized.

The first step toward an identification of a site is criticism of the written sources in which the place-name occurs to determine the most reliable form of the name. The earliest and most widely attested reading in John 1:28 is "Bethany beyond Jordan." This reading is supported by the Alexandrian, Caesarean, and Byzantine text types. Though Origen adopted the reading "Bethabara" which he apparently found in a few copies of his day, he states that "Bethany" is the reading of "nearly all the manuscripts."¹ The minority reading proposed by Origen was followed by Eusebius, Epiphanius, and John Chrysostom. However, the reading Bethany is favored on the basis of the age and distribution of the manuscript evidence, as well as the fact that, if Bethabara were original, there is no adequate reason why it should have been altered to "Bethany."² Later writers who used the name "Bethabara" appear to simply be following the suggestion of Origen.

The second consideration in discovering the location of a site is to determine the approximate location from documentary indications. "Bethany" in John 1:28 is qualified by the phrase "beyond the Jordan" which serves to distinguish it from the Bethany near Jerusalem (Matt. 4:15, 25; Mk. 3:8; 10:1; Jn. 3:26). A strong evidence for John's ministry being in Transjordan is the fact that he was imprisoned by Herod Antipas and eventually put to death in the Perea fortress of Machaerus.³ Since the

¹ Origen, "Commentary on John," p. 370.

² Bruce M. Metzger, A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament (London: United Bible Societies, 1971), p. 200.

³ Josephus Antiquities xviii. 116-19.

documentary evidence suggests very strongly that John the Baptist's main center of ministry was Perea, it would be quite natural to find the place of his early baptizing ministry in that region.

The gospels demonstrate that John's ministry was not only beyond the Jordan, but near the Jordan. It was John's custom to baptize in the river (Matt. 3:6; Mk. 1:5). Jesus arrived from Galilee at the Jordan (Matt. 3:13) and was baptized by John in the Jordan (Mk. 1:9). Jesus' mental picture of John places him by the river as evidence by His comparing John to a "reed shaken by the wind" (Matt. 11:7). Reeds would not be found in the waterless Wilderness of Judea, but they were innumerable along the banks of the Jordan. The evidence is overwhelming that John's early baptizing ministry was in Perea near the Jordan River at a site easily accessible to those dwelling in Judea and Jerusalem (Matt. 3:7; Mk. 1:5; Jn. 1:19).

The third aspect which must be considered in identifying a site is toponymy, or the analysis of place-names and their linguistic transmission. We begin by comparing ancient place-names with modern ones. Often the ancient place-name is preserved among local residents up to the present time. Usually the names are slightly modified as a result of changes in the spoken language, but rules governing these changes have been established by Kampffmeyer.¹ While the place-name "Bethany" is of uncertain Semitic derivation, Kopp has suggested that the name is derived from bēt aniyyāh, meaning "house of the boat/ship."² This name would be quite appropriate

¹G. Kampffmeyer, "Alte Namen in Heutigen Palastina and Syrien," Zeitschrift des deutschen Palastinia Vereins 15 (1892): 1-33, 66-116; 16(1893): 1-71. See also Aharoni, The Land of the Bible, pp. 108-12.

²Clemens Kopp, The Holy Places of the Gospels, trans. Ronald Walls (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963), p. 114.

for a ford community on the Jordan. The Madaba mosaic map of c. A.D. 560 pictures the Jordan River crossed by two constructions in which a horizontal line joins two uprights, with a boat below it. Avi-Yonah interprets these to represent ferries passing along ropes across the river.¹ If Bethany does indeed mean “house of the boat,” then it was probably located at a ford in the Jordan River. Bethany was probably a little village situated on the Jordan noted primarily as a ford and a place of refreshment for weary pilgrims traveling between Judea and Perea.

The fourth factor to consider in determining the location of a site is the results of surface exploration and archaeological excavation. Sadly, the geographer finds very little survey data to aid in the discovery of Bethany beyond the Jordan. Nelson Glueck, who has done extensive archaeological survey in Transjordan, passes over Bethany without any hint as to its location except that it would be in the land of Perea.² There is clearly a need for archaeological survey in the southern Jordan Valley with a view to locating ancient Jordan River ford communities. However, since the Jordan is a meandering river and frequently changes its channel during flood times, such an ancient ford community as Bethany may not be found on the present banks of the Jordan. It is possible that Bethany beyond the Jordan has been destroyed and completely silted over by the annual flooding of the Jordan River.

The final consideration in determining the location of a site is that of tradition.

¹Michael Avi-Yonah, The Madaba Mosaic Map (Jerusalem: The Israel Exploration Society, 1954), p. 35.

²Nelson Glueck, The River Jordan (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1946), p. 245.

While tradition may be quite valuable, it must be carefully evaluated and used with great caution. Dalman cogently summarizes the tradition concerning the site of John's baptizing ministry:

Church tradition—referred to for the first time by Origen in his commentary on St. John, then by Eusebius and the Madaba map, and also in Pseudo-Matthew—has always represented the place where Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan as being in just the spot shown today, namely, the ford of Hajlah.¹

Kopp does a superb job of tracing this tradition from its earliest times.² While Origen (A.D. 185-254) reported only hearsay concerning the place of John's baptizing ministry, Eusebius (A.D. 265-340) writes that the place of the baptisms is "Bethabara" on the far side of the Jordan.³ The Pilgrim of Bordeaux (A.D. 333) identifies the site of Jesus' baptism as five Roman miles (4½ miles) from (apparently north of) the Dead Sea. At this location five miles east of Jericho is the Greek Monastery of St. John situated about 700 yards west of the Jordan on a low hill safe from the spring flood waters of the Jordan. On the far side of the river at this location is the Wadi el-Kharrar which rises from a spring and flows westward into the Jordan.

Jerome's eulogy on St. Paula (A.D. 404) concerning her journey from Jerusalem to the Jordan indicates as well that the baptism of Jesus was at the Jordan east of Jericho. Theodosius (A.D. 550) is the first to make mention of a church built at this venerable site by the Emperor Anastasius (A.D. 491-518) apparently east of the Jordan. It is reported

¹Dalman, Sacred Sites and Ways, p. 88.

²Kopp, The Holy Places of the Gospels, pp. 114-15.

³Eusebius Onomastica Sacra 240, 12-13.

that just a few decades ago the ruins of a church believed to have been the Church of St. John of the Emperor Anastasius were still recognizable on the east bank about 54 yards northeast of the present ford. The Madaba mosaic map (A.D. 560) locates “Bethabara of St. John the Baptism” west of the Jordan opposite Jericho indicating the beginning of a change in tradition from the east to the west bank of the Jordan.¹

Anonymous of Piacenza (A.D. 570) locates the place where John baptized as a spring on the far side of the Jordan apparently up the Wadi el-Kharrar. Possibly such an alternative site would have been necessary during the rainy season when the Jordan would be unsafe for immersion. The Georgian Calendar (before A.D. 638) is one of the oldest links in the chain of evidence which, like John 1:28, points to the east bank of the Jordan as the place of Jesus’ baptism.

Kopp notes that after the Arab conquest (A.D. 640), the west bank became the traditional place of Jesus’ baptism, no doubt because the desert east of the Jordan was becoming more and more unfriendly.² Arculf (A.D. 670) records a tradition that Jesus was baptized in the middle of the river, and Willibald (A.D. 724-26) records that a chapel marked the spot on the west bank of the Jordan where Jesus was baptized. This incorrect location of the site of the baptism has been carried on down through the centuries. In recent times the Hajlah ford, just east of Qasr el-Yahud (“the fort of the Jews”) believed to be the ruins of the monastery built by Anastasius,

¹Avi-Yonah, The Madaba Mosaic Map, pp. 38-39.

²Kopp, The Holy Places of the Gospels, pp. 121-22.

has been favored as the site of Jesus' baptism.¹

While the most reliable ancient tradition associates Bethany and the site of Jesus' baptism with the east bank of the Jordan, apparently in later times, particularly after the Arab conquest, the tradition shifted to the west bank. A later pilgrim, Grethenios (A.D. 1400) heard that the cave of St. John was supposed to lie on the far side of the Jordan but did not venture there for fear of the Arabs.² Reliable tradition does appear to associate Bethany with the Hajlah ford on the Jordan east of Jericho. The tradition that Jesus was baptized east of the Jordan was slightly modified by generations of pilgrims to a site west of the river which was easier to visit and not endangered by marauding Arabs.

Archaeological evidence that could confirm the identification of a specific site is lacking. Most of the ceramics found in and around the Wadi el-Kharrar date from Byzantine times. There are no signs of habitation from the time of Christ. While this is a problem, it must be remembered that the Jordan has not only changed its course, but has flooded many times. It would be unlikely for the remains of a small hamlet on the east bank of the Jordan to have survived so many centuries since the time of Christ. It is possible that the ruins of Bethany beyond the Jordan will never be found, but an abundance of evidence indicates that cartographers should place it east of the Jordan River near the Hajlah ford in the vicinity of Wadi el-Kharrar.

¹Archaeological Encyclopaedia of the Holy Land, s.v. "Beth-abara," p. 47.

²Kopp, The Holy Places of the Gospels, p. 126.

