

Jordan

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(Heb. Yarden', יַרְדֵן, always with the article הַיַּרְדֵן; Ἰορδάνης), the chief and most celebrated river of Palestine, flowing through a deep valley down the center of the country from north to south. The principal river of the entire region, however (hence usually styled in the original "the River"), is the Euphrates (q.v.). (See RIVER).

1. The Name. — This signifies descender, from the root יָרַד, "to descend" — a name most applicable to it, whether we consider the rapidity of its current, or the great depth of the valley through which it runs. From whatever part of the country its banks are approached, the descent is long and steep. That this is the true etymology of the word seems evident from an incidental remark in [Joshua 3:16](#), where, in describing the effect of the opening of a passage for the Israelites, the word used for the "coming down" of the waters (גִּירְדִּים) is almost the same as the name of the river (see Stanley, S. and P. p. 279, note). Other derivations have been given. Some say it is compounded of יָאֹר, a river, and דָן, the name of the city where it rises, but this etymology is impossible (Reland, Paloest. p. 271). Another view is, that the river having two sources, the name of the one was Jor, and of the other Dan; hence the united stream is called Jordan. So Jerome (Comm. in [Matthew 16:13](#)). This theory has been copied by Adamnanus (De Loc. Sanct. 2, 19), William of Tyre (8, 18), Brocardus (p. 3), Adrichomius (p. 109), and others; and the etymology seems to have spread among the Christians in Palestine, from whom Burckhardt heard it (Travels in Syria, p. 42, 43; see Robinson, Bib. Res. 3, 412, note). Arab geographers call the river either El-Urdon, which is equivalent to the Hebrew, or Esh-sheriah, which signifies "the watering place;" and this latter is the name almost universally given to it by the modern Syrians, who sometimes attach the appellative el-Kebir, "the great," by way of distinction from the Sheriat el-Mandhur,

or Hieromax.

2. Sources. — The snows that deeply cover Hermon during the whole winter, and that still cap its glittering summit during the hottest days of summer, are the real springs of the Jordan. They feed its perennial fountains, and they supply from a thousand channels those superabundant waters which make the river "overflow all its banks in harvest time" (*Joshua 3:15*). The Jordan has two historical sources.

a. In the midst of a rich but marshy plain, lying between the southern prolongation of Hermon and the mountains of Naphtali, is a low cup shaped hill, thickly covered with shrubs. On it once stood Dan, the northern border city of Palestine; and from its western base gushes forth the great fountain of the Jordan. The waters at once form a large pond encircled with rank grass and jungle — now the home of the wild boar — and then flow off southward. Within the rim of the cup, beneath the spreading branches of a gigantic oak, is a smaller spring. It is fed, doubtless, by the same source, and its stream, breaking through the rim, joins its sister, and forms a river some forty feet wide, deep and rapid. The modern name of the hill is Tell el-Kady, "the hill of the judge;" and both fountain and river are called Leddan — evidently the name Dan corrupted by a double article, Eled-Dan (Robinson, Bib. Res. 3, 394; Thomson, Land and Book, p. 214; and in *Bibliotheca Sac.* 1846, p. 196). Josephus calls this stream "Little Jordan" (*τὸν μικρὸν Ιορδάνην*, War, 4, 1, 1; comp. Ant. 1, 10, 1; 8, 8, 4); but it is the principal source of the river, and the largest fountain in Syria.

b. Four miles east of Tell el-Kady, on a lower terrace of Hermon, amid forests of oak, lie the ruins of Banias, the ancient Caesarea-Philippi, and more ancient Panium. Beside the ruins is a lofty cliff of red limestone, having a large fountain at its base. Beneath the cliff there was formerly, as Josephus tells us, a gloomy cave, and within it a yawning abyss of unfathomable depth, filled with water. This was the other source of the Jordan (War, 1, 21, 3; comp. Ant. 15, 10, 3; Pliny, 5, 12; Mishna, Para, 8, 12). A temple was erected over the cave by Herod, and its ruins now fill it and conceal the fountain. From it a foaming torrent still bursts, and dashes down to the plain through a narrow rocky ravine, and then glides swiftly on till it joins the other about four miles south of Tell el-Kady (Robinson, 3, 397; Porter

Handbook, p. 446).

c. The Jordan has also a fabled fountain, thus described by Josephus: "Apparently Panium is the source of the Jordan, but the water is, in reality, conveyed thither unseen by a subterranean channel from Phiala, as it is called, which lies not far from the high road, on the right as you ascend to Trachonitis, at the distance of 120 stadia from Caesarea.... That the Jordan hence derived its origin was formerly unknown, until it was ascertained by Philip, tetrarch of Trachonitis, who, having thrown chaff into Phiala, found it cast out at Panium" (War, 3, 10, 7). The lake here referred to appears to be Burkett er-Ram, which Robinson visited and described (Bib. Res. 3, 399). The legend has no foundation in reality.

d. Other fountains in this region, though unnamed in history, contribute much to the Jordan. The chief of these, and the highest perennial source of the Jordan, is in the bottom of a valley at the western base of Hermon, a short distance from the town of Hasbeiya, and twelve miles north of Tell el-Kady. The fountain is in a pool at the foot of a basalt cliff; the stream from it, called Hasbany (from Hasbeiya), flows through a narrow glen into the plain, and falls into the main stream about a mile south of the junction of the Leddan and Baniasy. The relative size of the three streams Robinson thus estimates: "That from Banias is twice as large as the Hasbany, while the Leddan is twice, if not three times the size of that from Banias" (Bib. Res. 3, 395). The united river flows southward through the marshy plain for six miles, and then falls into Lake Huleh, called in Scripture "The Waters of Merom." (See MEROM).

e. Besides these, a considerable stream comes down from the plain of Ijon, west of the Hasbany; and two large fountains (called Balat and Mellahah) burst forth from the base of the mountain chain of Naphtali (Porter, Handbook for S. and P. p. 436).

3. Physical Features of the Jordan and its Valley. — The most remarkable feature of the Jordan is, that throughout nearly its entire course it is below the level of the sea. Its valley is thus like a huge fissure in the earth's crust. The following measurements, taken from Van de Velde's Memoir accompanying his Map, will give the best idea of the depression of this singular valley:

Fountain of Jordan at Hasbeiya... 1700 ft. elevation.

Fountain of Jordan at Banias..... 1147 ft. elevation.

Fountain of Jordan at Dan..... 647 ft. elevation.

Lake Hileh..... about 120 ft. elevation.

Lake of Tiberias..... 650 ft. depression.

Dead Sea..... 1312 ft. depression.

There may be some error in the elevations of the fountains as here given. Lake Haleh is encompassed by a great plain, extending to Dan; and as it appears to the eye almost level, it is difficult to believe that there could be a difference of 500 feet in the elevations of the fountain and the lake. Porter estimated it on the spot at not above 100 feet; but it is worthy of note that Von Wildenbruch makes it by measurement 537 feet, and De Bertou 344.

The general course of the Jordan is due south. From their fountains the three streams flow south to the points of junction, and continue in the same direction to the Huleh; and from the southern extremity of this lake the Jordan again issues and resumes its old course. For some two miles its banks are flat, and its current not very rapid; but on passing through Jisr Benat Yakub ("the Bridge of Jacob's Daughters"), the banks suddenly contract and rise high on each side, and the river dashes in sheets of foam over a rocky bed, rebounding from cliff to cliff in its mad career. Here and there the retreating banks have a little green meadow, with its fringe of oleanders all wet and glistening with spray. Thus it rushes on, often winding, occasionally doubling back like the coils of a serpent, till, breaking from rocky barriers, it enters the rich plain of Batihah, where on the left bank stand the ruins of Bethsaida (q.v.). The stream now expands, and glides lazily along till it falls on the still bosom of the Sea of Galilee. Between Bethsaida and the sea the Jordan averages about twenty yards in width, and flows sluggishly between low alluvial banks. Bars of sand extend across its channel here and there, at which it is easily forded (Porter, Handbook, p. 426; Robinson, 2, 414 sq.; Burckhardt, Symria, p. 315). From Jisr Benat Yakub the distance is only seven miles, and yet in that distance the river falls 700 feet. The total length of the section between the two lakes is about eleven miles as the crow flies.

An old tradition tells us that the Jordan flows direct through the Sea of

Galilee without mingling with its waters. The origin of the story may be the fact that the river enters the lake at the northern extremity, and leaves it at a point exactly opposite at the southern, without apparent increase or diminution.

The third section of the river, lying between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea, is the Jordan of Scripture, the other two sections not being directly mentioned either in the O.T. or N.T. Until the last few years little was known of it. The notices of ancient geographers are not full. Travelers had crossed it at several points, but all the portions between these points were unknown. When the remarkable depression of the Dead Sea was ascertained by trigonometrical measurement, and when it was shown that the Jordan must have a fall of 1400 feet in its short course of about 100 miles, the measurements were called in question by that distinguished geographer Dr. Robinson, in a paper read before the Royal Geographical Society in 1847 (Journal, vol. 18, part 2). In that same year lieutenant Molyneux, R.N., conveyed a boat from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea, mostly in the river, but in places on the backs of camels, where rocks and rapids prevented navigation. Owing to the hostility of the Arabs the expedition was not successful, and the Jordan was not yet explored. Lieutenant Lynch, of the United States Navy, headed a much more successful expedition in 1848, and was the first fully to describe the course, and fully to solve the mysteries of the Jordan. His Official Report is the standard work on the river. Molyneux's paper in the Journal of the Royal Geog. Society also contains some useful matter (vol. 18, part 2).

The valley through which this section of the Jordan flows is a long, low plain, running from north to south, and shut in by steep and rugged parallel ridges, the eastern ridge rising fully 5000 feet above the river's bed, and the western about 3000. This plain is the great plain of the later Jews; the great desert (*πολλὴνέρημίαν*) of Josephus; the Aulon. or "channel" of the Greek geographers; the "region of Jordan" of the N.T. ([Matthew 3:5](#); [Luke 3:3](#)); and the Ghor or "sunken plain" of the modern Arabs (Stanley, p. 277; Josephus, War, 3, 9, 7; 4, 8, 2; Reland, Paloest. p. 305, 361, 377 sq.). It is about six miles wide at its northern end, but it gradually expands until it attains a width of upwards of twelve at Jericho. Its sides are not straight lines, nor is its

surface perfectly level. The mountains on each side here and there send out rocky spurs, and long, low roots far into it. Winter torrents, descending from wild ravines, cut deeply through its soft strata. As a whole it is now a desert. In its northern division, above the fords of Succoth, small portions are cultivated around fountains, and along the banks of streamlets, where irrigation is easy; but all the rest is a wilderness — in spring covered with rank grass and thistles, but in summer parched and bare. The southern section — known as the "plain of Jericho" — is different in aspect. Its surface is covered with a white nitrous crust, like hoarfrost, through which not a blade of grass or green herb springs. Nothing could be imagined more dreary or desolate than this part of the plain.

Down the midst of the plain winds a ravine, varying from 200 yards to half a mile in breadth, and from 40 to 150 feet in depth. Through this the Jordan flows in a tortuous course, now sweeping the western, and now the eastern bank; now making a wide, graceful curve, and now doubling back, but everywhere fringed by a narrow, dense border of trees and shrubs. The river has thus two distinct lines of banks. The first or lower banks confine the stream, and are from five to ten feet high, the height of course decreasing in spring when the river is high; the second or upper are at some distance from the channel, and in places rise to a height of 150 feet. The scenery of the river is peculiar and striking. Lynch thus describes the upper section: "The high alluvial terraces on each side were everywhere shaped by the action of the winter rains into numbers of conical hills, some of them pyramidal and cuneiform, presenting the appearance of a giant encampment. This singular conformation extended southwards as far as the eye could reach. At intervals I caught a glimpse of the river in its graceful meanderings, sometimes glittering like a spearhead through an opening in the foliage, and again clasping some little island in its shining arms, or, far away, snapping with the fierceness and white foam of a torrent by some projecting point.... The banks were fringed with the lauarustinus, the oleander, the willow, and the tamarisk, and further inland, on the slope of the second terrace, grew a small species of oak, and the cedar." The Jordan issues from the Sea of Galilee close to the hills on the western side of the plain, and sweeps

round a little peninsula, on which lie the ruins of Tarichaea (Porter, Handb. p. 321; Robinson, 1, 538). The stream is about 100 feet wide, and the current strong (Lynch). A short distance down are the remains of a Roman bridge, whose fallen arches greatly obstruct the river, and make it dash through in sheets of foam. Below this are several weirs, constructed of rough stones, and intended to raise the water and turn it into canals, so as to irrigate the neighboring plain (Molyneux). Five miles from the lake the Jordan receives its largest tributary, the Sheriat el-Mandhur (the Hieromax of the Greeks), which drains a large section of Bashan and Gilead. This stream is 130 feet wide at its mouth. Two miles further is Jisr el-Mejamia, the only bridge now standing on the Lower Jordan. It is a quaint structure, one large pointed arch spanning the stream, and double tiers of smaller arches supporting the roadway on each side. The river is here deep and impetuous, breaking over high ledges of rocks.

Below this point the ravine inclines eastwards to the center of the plain, and its banks contract. Its sides are bare and white, and the chalky strata are deeply furrowed. The margin of the river has still its beautiful fringe of foliage, and the little islets which occur here and there are covered with shrubbery. Fifteen miles south of the bridge, wady Yabes (so called from Jabesh-gilead), containing a winter torrent, falls in from the east. A short distance above it a barren sandy island divides the channel, and with its bars on each side forms a ford, probably the one by which Jacob crossed as the site of Succoth has been identified on the western, bank. The plain round Succoth is extensively cultivated, and abundantly watered by fountains and streamlets from the adjoining mountains. The richness of the soil is wonderful. Dr. Robinson says, "The grass, intermingled with tall daisies and wild oats, reached to our horses' backs, while the thistles sometimes over topped the riders' heads. All was now dry, and in some places it was difficult to make our way through this exuberant growth." (3, p. 313). Jacob exercised a wise choice when "he made booths for his cattle" at this favored spot ([Genesis 33:17](#)). No other place in the great plain equals it in richness. The ravine of the Jordan is here 150 feet below the plain, and shut in by steep, bare banks of chalky strata (Robinson, l.c. p. 316). About nine miles below Succoth,

and about halfway between the lakes, the Jabbok, the only other considerable tributary, falls into the Jordan, coming down through a deep, wild glen in the mountains of Gilead. When Lynch passed (April 17) it was "a small stream trickling down a deep and wide torrent bed.... There was another bed, quite dry, showing that in times of freshet there were two outlets." Lynch gives some good pictures of the scenery above the junction. "The plain that sloped away from the bases of the hills was broken into ridges and multitudinous cone like mounds... A low, pale yellow ridge of conical hills marked the termination of the higher terrace, beneath which swept gently this low plain, with a similar undulating surface, half redeemed from barrenness by sparse verdure and thistle-covered hillocks. Still lower was the valley of the Jordan — its banks fringed with perpetual verdure — winding a thousand graceful mazes... its course a bright line in this cheerless waste."

Below the Jabbok the fall of the river is still greater than above, but there is less obstruction from rocks and cliffs. The jungles along the banks become denser, the sides of the river glen more regular, and the plain above more dreary and desolate.

On approaching the Dead Sea, the plain of the Jordan attains its greatest breadth — about twelve miles. The mountain ranges on each side are — higher, more rugged, and more desolate. The plain is coated with a nitrous crust, like hoarfrost, and not a tree, shrub, or blade of grass is seen except by fountains or rivulets. The glen winds like a serpent through the center, between two tiers of banks. The bottom is smooth, and sprinkled on the outside with stunted shrubs. The river winds in ceaseless coils along the bottom, now touching one side and now another, with its beautiful border of green foliage, looking all the greener from contrast with the desert above. The banks are of soft clay, in places ten feet high; the stream varies from 80 to 150 feet in breadth, and from five to twelve in depth. Near its mouth the current becomes more sluggish, and the stream expands. Where wady Hesban falls in, Lynch found the river 150 feet wide and 11 deep, "the current four knots." Further down the banks are low and sedgy; the width gradually increases to 180 yards at its mouth, but the depth is only three feet (Lynch, Official Report; Robinson, 1, 538 sq.;

Stanley, p. 290).