

“Aroer which is on the edge of the valley of Arnon”

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The town Aroer and the river Arnon occur together in two constructions:

(1.) Deut. 2:36 (NASB):

From Aroer which is on the edge of the valley of Arnon and from the city which is in the valley, even to Gilead, there was no city that was too high for us; ...

מֵעֲרֹעַר אֲשֶׁר עַל-שֵׁפֶת-נַחַל אַרְנוֹן

The same in Deut. 4:48; Josh. 12:2; 13:9; 13:16.

(2.) Deut. 3:12 (NASB):

... From Aroer, which is by the valley of Arnon, and half the hill country of Gilead ...

מֵעֲרֹעַר אֲשֶׁר-עַל-נַחַל אַרְנוֹן

The same in 2Ki. 10:33.

The question is where exactly Aroer is situated: on the river (right by it), or near it (at some distance).

Both constructions are ambiguous, because:

(a) נַחַל can refer to the *stream* itself, or to a *valley* with a stream (Gesenius¹⁸, HALOT). Some versions say “wadi”. A wadi, too, can mean the stream itself or a valley (dictionary.com).

(b) שֵׁפֶה (elsewhere ‘lip / language’) means ‘edge’, but it is not immediately clear whether it refers to the extreme end of an object, or the edge/margin as an “area” so to speak. It is used both of the sea shore (Gen 22:17) and of a river bank (Gen 41:3) (HALOT).

Archeological & geographical information helps. This is what some resources say:

The Arnon is a river of ca. 50 km length. Over this short stretch it descends some 1.000 meters. The latter part of it is a deep narrow gorge (Archäologisches Bibellexikon), but south of Dibon the valley is 4 km wide (Lexikon zur Bibel).

Aroer is “a small tell on the northern slope of the Arnon valley, about a mile from the stream”. It overlooks the King’s Highway (JPSTC on Deut., p. 418), from a 750 meters high hill (Lexikon zur Bibel). Several maps show Aroer somewhat removed from the river Arnon, not “on” it. Today the place is called Khirbet Ara‘ir (JPSTC on Deut., p. 418).

Translation: For Construction # 1, a translation like in NASB “**on the edge of the valley**” is correct. For Construction # 2, there are more possibilities. One should avoid a rendering where Aroer is “on” the Arnon river. REB89 (“Aroer on the wadi of the Arnon”) can be misunderstood that way. NASB (“by the valley of Arnon”) seems not ideal, because it makes it sound as if the town was removed not only from the river, but even from its valley. GNTD has a good solution saying “**Aroer near the Arnon River**”.

Note: As to the other “city which is in the valley” (Deut. 2:36), that one is “near the stream or possible on an island in it ... perhaps a fort” (so JPSTC, apparently followed by NIVAC). It “may either have been a suburb of Aroer, further into the valley and close to the water’s edge or else it may have been further up the valley” (so NICOT, referring to Smith).