

Some geography-related issues in the text of Numbers

Notes. 2019. Quotes by NRSV.

Compared with key terms, the issues that I address here are minor ones. But the more details can be unravelled, the clearer the translation will become. And the collection of data offered here allows translators to deal with several related verses together at the same time.

1. How do Abarim, Nebo, and Pisgah relate to each other?

The references mentioned below cover all occurrences in Num and Deut.

What these names refer to, and how these entities relate to each other, is first of all a matter of understanding the text. It is also relevant for translating, if one wants to add specifiers to the names, and if one wants to express the locations precisely and in a synchronized way.

1.1. Abarim

Abarim is the larger mountain range traversing Moab in north-south direction.

It is used to describe where Mount Nebo is found (Num 33:47). In Num 33:48, the Abarim mountains stand in contrast to the Moab plains.

Deut 32:49 says:

Ascend this mountain of the Abarim, Mount Nebo ...

Here, one must not confuse the smaller with the bigger unit: The apposition Nebo is *more specific* than the first noun phrase “this mountain of the Abarim”. (For a different case, see on Deut 34:1 below.)

1.2. Nebo

Nebo is a peak in the Abarim mountain range.

Nebo is the last place in the itinerary of the Israelites before they enter the plains of Moab (Num 33:47. See *Handbook*.) (But compare the account in Num 21:20.)

According to ISBE, Mount Nebo is identified with “a headland called Râs es-Siâghah, 10 km. (6 mi.) NW of the town of Mâdebâ (Medeba) in East Jordan.”

Mount Nebo is where Moses dies. His death is first announced in Num 27:12-13 (where only the Abarim mountains are mentioned), and then again in Deut 32:49-50. Finally, Moses’ death is reported in Deut 34:1-5. (Cf. Deut 3:27.)

Nebo is **also a town** close to this mountain, mentioned among others in Reuben’s territory (Num 32:3/38).

“Nebo” and “Pisgah” occur together in Deut 34:1:

... Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah ...

“The top of Pisgah” is an apposition. It should not be translated as “peak / summit”, because the specific mountain that Moses went onto is Mount Nebo. The *Handbook* allows for both Pisgah as the highest peak of Nebo, or Nebo being a separate peak on Pisgah. But the latter seems more likely (see below). Either way, a translation should follow one and the same interpretation in all places.

1.3. Pisgah

Pisgah is, probably, a mountain range, or **a mountain area, that is part of the larger Abarim mountains.**

Pisgah is always talked about either as “**top of Pisgah**” (e.g. Num 21:20) or “**slopes of Pisgah**” (e.g. Deut 4:49). Translators should be consistent in the use of these two expressions.

The precise definition of Pisgah is problematic, but Milgrom and Ashley basically agree.

Milgrom (JPSTC, 1990) says:

It is not clear whether it is a mountain, mountain range, or district. The construct *ro'sh*, “peak” ..., militates against “district” ... and the plural construct *'ashdot*, “slopes” ..., militates against the singular “mountain,” leaving a “mountain range” as the most likely meaning. Perhaps it refers to part of the larger chain of mountains, Abarim ..., that traverses the length of Moab

Ashley (NICOT, 1993) says:

The Pisgah is a collective term for the headlands of the Moabite plateau (23:14; Deut. 3:27; 34:1), which falls off quite sharply to the Dead Sea. This term may also refer to the north end of the Abarim range of mountains. From the west these headlands appear to jut up about 3,500–4,000 feet.

Pisgah **serves to describe the area below it**, as in Num 21:20 (“... the top of Pisgah that overlooks the wasteland”), or in Deut 3:17 (“... the Dead Sea, with the lower slopes of Pisgah on the east.”).

Num 21:20 reads:

and from Bamoth to the valley lying in the region of Moab by the top of Pisgah that overlooks the wasteland

Here, the grammatical relation between “region of Moab” and “top of Pisgah” is not altogether clear. The word “by” does not have an equivalent in Hebrew. But most likely it reflects the right understanding (so NJPS, Ashley and the *Handbook*).

In Deut 34:1, the apposition (Pisgah) expresses the *wider area* of the first noun phrase “Mount Nebo”.

... went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, ...

Note that this is in contrast to the apposition in Deut 32:49, where the smaller unit is named in the second place (see above).

Pisgah is the place **where Balaam gives his second oracle** (Num 23:14 – A problem in this verse is how to translate “the field of Zophim”: does it imply a high plateau?).

Deut 3:27 tells us how **Moses went to the top of Pisgah to look over into the promised land**.

Pisgah is also part of the description of the **border for the tribes east of Jordan** (Deut 3:17).

1.4. Translation

If there is a desire to add specifiers to the names discussed above, the following are recommended:

Abarim – (larger) mountain range / mountain chain / mountains

Nebo – mountain / Mount / peak / summit

Pisgah – (smaller) mountain ridge / mountain chain / mountains / peak area

Figure: A picture of Mount Nebo can be found at <https://www.bibleplaces.com/jordanrift/>

Map: A map of the area can be found in: Tübinger Bibelatlas, map B IV 6 Süd.

2. Moab: the “field” is larger than the “plains”

The main point here is to ensure a coordinated rendering of Num 21:20 and 22:1.

There are two distinct expressions.

(1) שְׂדֵה מוֹאָב “**the field of Moab**” occurs in Gen 36:35; Num 21:20; several times in Ruth (beginning at 1:1), and in 1Chr 1:46; 8:8. It is used of **the territory of the Moabite people** (see HALOT s. v. שְׂדֵה).

Translations include the following: “land of Moab” (NASB), “region of Moab” (NRSV), “territory of the Moabites” (GNT), or simply “Moab” (NIV, NLT).

Num 21:20 says about the last stage of the journey of the Israelites:

and from Bamoth to the valley lying in the region of Moab, at the top of Pisgah which overlooks the wasteland.

This “valley in the region of Moab” is not to be mistaken as “the plains of Moab” (see below), as in HFA.¹ The place is still in the hill country.

Milgrom comments:

As distinct from *nahal* or wadi, where water flows ..., *gai*’ refers to a valley between mountains.²

Ashley explains:

The final campsite in the itinerary is in a *valley*. The most likely site for this valley is Wadi ‘Ayūn Mūsā, which is about two mi. northeast of the Dead Sea. [Footnote: So Gray, p. 291; McNeile, p. 117; Binns, p. 144. Noordtziĵ, p. 190, identifies the site as Ghor el-Belqa in the same general area (a bit to the south).]

CEV is the most explicit in describing the site:

Finally, they reached Moabite territory, where they camped near Mount Pisgah in a valley overlooking the desert north of the Dead Sea.

However, “overlooking” should refer to Pisgah, not to the valley.

(2) עֲרְבוֹת מוֹאָב “**the plains of Moab**” occurs nine times in Numbers (beginning at 22:1), and in Deut 34:1/8 and Josh 13:32. It denotes “**the east bank of the Jordan, from W. Nimrim southwards**” (HALOT s. v. עֲרְבָה III, § 2. c) ii), with literature).

Other translations include “steppes” (NJPS) and “lowlands” (REB).

Ashley (on Num 22:1) says:

the plains of Moab (‘ar^ebôt mō ‘āb) are the flat and fertile strip of country (about 5–6 mi. wide) north and east of the Dead Sea.

Num 22:1 reads:

The Israelites set out, and camped in the plains of Moab across the Jordan from Jericho.

In Num 21:20, the people had reached Moabite territory, but still camped in the mountains. In Num 22:1, they reached their final destination before crossing the river Jordan. The two verses should be translated in such a way that no contradiction is created.

Remark on the sequence of events:

Chapter 21 is not composed in chronological sequence. The events of vv. 21-35 must be placed somewhere between vv. 13 and 19. Wenham (TOTC, 1981) says on Num 21:21 – 22:1:

The narrative now explains in detail what happened when Israel arrived at the border of the Amorite kingdom (*cf.* 13).

Compare Deut 2:26, which makes clear that Israel was in the desert of Kedemoth when they sent messengers to Sihon. Thus the *Handbook* (on 21:21) points out:

The events in this section [i.e. 21:21-35] took place before the Israelites reached Mount Pisgah (verse 20), since this mountain was located in the land of the Amorites. So the conjunction **Then** is better translated “One day,” “It happened that,” or “During their travels.

Consequently, when the itinerary is continued in 22:1, that verse should perhaps also not begin with “Then ...” (as in NASB, NIV, NLT), because that could suggest immediate consecutiveness to what precedes. A solution without any conjunction might be better (see NRSV and others). Hebrew has just a consecutive imperfect ‘and they set out’.

The itineraries in Num 21:10-20 and 33:44-49 complement each other.

¹ “Schließlich erreichten sie die Ebene im Land der Moabiter, aus der sich der Berg Pisga erhebt.”

² But as his comment on Num 22:1 shows, Milgrom himself makes no distinction between the “field / country of Moab” and the “plains / steppes of Moab”.

3. King Sihon and King Og are both Amorites

Num 32:33 speaks of “King Sihon of the Amorites and ... King Og of Bashan”. This could sound as mutually exclusive. However, “Amorites” is an ethnic designation, “Bashan” a geographical one. Deut 4:47 speaks of Sihon and Og explicitly as “the two kings of the Amorites”.

Ideally, in places like Num 32:33, one should avoid the impression that Sihon was the only king of the Amorites. This could be done by using an adjective (“the Amorite King Sihon”, so HFA) or by underlining the designations as in T4T: “Sihon, the king of the Amor people-group, ... and ... Og, the king of Bashan *region*”.

4. Iye Abarim and Iyim are the same town

4.1. The Names

The proper name אֵי־אֲבָרִים *iyyê hā ‘bārîm* ‘Iyim’ occurs in Num 33:45, referring to a city in Moab, and in Jos 15:29, referring to one in Judah (HALAT).

אֵי־אֲבָרִים *iyyê hā ‘bārîm* ‘Iye-abarim’ in Num 33:44 is identical with ‘Iyim’ in Num 33:45 (*Handbook*; Ashley, Budd and Milgrom all seem to assume this, although they do not spell it out.) The same city ‘Iye-abarim’ is also mentioned in Num 21:11.

The Heb. word rendered ‘Iye’ is the construct form of the one that is rendered ‘Iyim’, thus the full name is literally “the Iyim of the Abarim”.

4.2. The town’s location

Two verses inform us about Iyim’s location:

Num 21:11 says:

..., and camped at Iye-abarim, in the wilderness bordering Moab toward the sunrise.

(*Literally*: ... in the wilderness which is on the face of Moab from sunrise)

Num 33:44 says:

... and camped at Iye-abarim, in the territory of Moab.

The *Handbook* (on 21:11) comments:

In the wilderness which is opposite Moab, toward the sunrise means Iye-abarim was in the desert just east of Moab. NJPSV says “in the wilderness bordering on Moab to the east,” and GNT is similar with “in the wilderness east of Moabite territory.” The Israelites did not yet enter Moab itself; rather, they were going around it along its eastern border. ...

4.3. Translation

- When transliterating into another language, *iyyê* and *iyyîm* should not be spelled differently, because readers should not be burdened with having to decode the Heb. morphology (absolute *versus* construct form).
- The English versions that use ‘Iye-abarim’ in Num 33:44, but ‘Iyim’ in v. 45 (like REB) fail to make it transparent that this is the same place. The *Handbook* (on Num 33:45) suggests:

Iyim (verse 45) is another name for **Iye-abarim**, so some translations only refer to “Iye-abarim” to avoid confusion (so NLT, NCV).
- Also, for instance NRSV and NET speak of “Iye-Abarim” in v. 44, but of the “mountains of Abarim” in v. 47. The link could be spelled out by speaking of “Iye in (the mountains of) Abarim”.
- The *Handbook* (on Num 33:44) suggests:

In the territory of Moab is better rendered “on the border of Moab” (NIV, NLT) to agree with 21.11, where it says **Iye-abarim** was east of Moab.

5. Ar and Ir in Moab

There are four occurrences of these words that need to be put in the right relation to each other. The table presents the relevant data.

Reference, Text and Context	Handbook	Commentaries	Translation
<p>עַר Ar Num 21:15 “and the slopes of the wadis that extend to the seat of Ar, and lie along the border of Moab.”</p> <p>(ancient poem quoted when the Israelites come close to the Arnon)</p>	<p>“The Hebrew word for seat in the phrase the seat of Ar is quite generic, meaning “site” (NIV, TOB) or “dwelling” (NET). If a more specific rendering is needed, “town” (GNT) or even “village” may be used. <u>The precise location of Ar is uncertain.</u> <u>According to Deut 2.18, it was near the Moabite border, which fits the context here.</u>”</p>	<p>Milgrom: “Either (1) a city on the Arnon ..., (2) a district bordering the Arnon ..., or (3) the equivalent of Kir, the capital of Moab ..., a metonymy for the entire country ... The second interpretation seems preferable here.”</p> <p>Ashley: “Ar is probably the same site mentioned in Deut. 2:9, 18, 29, and probably the same as Ar of Moab (Num. 21:28; Isa. 15:1) and “the city of Moab” (<i>‘ir-mô ‘āb</i>, Num. 22:36; <i>‘ār</i> is cognate to <i>‘ir</i>, “city,” pl. <i>‘ārīm</i>). ...”</p>	<p>proper name of a town (or district): Ar (identical with the below)</p>
<p>עַר מוֹאָב Ar of Moab Num 21:28 “For fire came out from Heshbon, flame from the city of Sihon. It devoured Ar of Moab, and swallowed up the heights of the Arnon.”</p> <p>(ancient poem quoted)</p>	<p>“For Ar of Moab, see verse 15.”</p>	<p>Milgrom: “...refers either to a city ... or to a district near the Arnon (see ... v. 15)”</p> <p>Ashley: “If the site suggested at the eastern extremity of the Arnon (see 21:15 above) is the right one, then the clause gives part of the scope of the conquest.”</p>	<p>Ar of Moab / Ar in Moab (identical with the above)</p>
<p>עִיר מוֹאָב Ir Moab Num 22:36 “When Balak heard that Balaam had come, he went out to meet him at Ir-moab, on the boundary formed by the Arnon, at the farthest point of</p>	<p>“RSV follows the Hebrew text reads by translating the city of Moab (<i>‘ir mo`ab</i>). Since this reading does not quite make sense in the context, some translations have simply transliterated the Hebrew here, saying “Ir-moab” (NRSV, NJPSV, TOB, SB, CRV). Others have understood this phrase as a reference to an</p>	<p>HOTTP reads “Ar”, with a {C} rating.</p> <p>Milgrom: “Probably identical with Ar of Moab ... on the southern shore of the upper Arnon. Alternatively, it is identified with El Medeyim on the Wadi es Sfei, a tributary of the Arnon in the northeast.”</p>	<p><i>Either</i>: equate with Ar (above),</p> <p><i>or</i>: follow the <i>Handbook</i>. Other versions that do so are these: NIV (“...he went out to meet him <u>at the Moabite town on the Arnon border</u>, at</p>

<p>the boundary.”</p>	<p>unspecified Moabite city, so they say “a city of Moab” (KJV) or “a Moabite town” (NLT, NIRV). Still other translations change the Hebrew text to read <i>‘ar mo‘ab</i>, which they render “Ar of Moab” (REB, FRCL, Luther, HOTTP) or “Ar-Moab” (NJB), taking it as a reference to the Moabite border city of Ar (so also GNT; see 21.15, 28). <u>We prefer RSV’s rendering of the Hebrew text here, following GECL’s understanding of it</u> (see the model below). [..., <u>he went out to meet him at the border town of Moab on the Arnon River, which was at the farthest [northern] border of his land.</u>”</p>	<p>Ashley: “<i>the city of Moab</i> (<i>‘ir mō‘āḇ</i>). Most scholars assume that this should be read as a proper name, Ir-Moab, and, furthermore, should probably be equated with Ar-Moab in 21:15, 28. Two relative clauses identify this site. The first one (<i>which is in the region of the Arnon</i>) places the site at the Arnon River, which formed the northern frontier of Moab at this time (cf. 21:13, 26). The second clause (<i>at the extremity of that region</i>) places it at the eastern edge of that territory (cf. 23:7). This is consistent with what has been said about the site of Ar-Moab above.”</p>	<p>the edge of his territory.”); NET (“...he went out to meet him at a city of Moab which was on the border of the Arnon at the boundary of his territory.”); NLT (“... he went out to meet him at a Moabite town on the Arnon River at the farthest border of his land.”)</p>
<p>עִיר Ir Num 24:19 “One out of Jacob shall rule, and destroy the survivors of Ir.” (part of Balaam's oracle)</p>	<p>“NIV and NBG follow the Hebrew here more closely with “and [he will] destroy the survivors of the city,” and so does NET with “he will destroy the remains of the city.” ... Another helpful model is “He kills those who escape from the city” (NBV). <u>The singular Hebrew word for “city” has a plural sense here, so FRCL renders this line as “he exterminates the last inhabitants of their [the Edomites’] cities.”</u> GNT omits “of the city” (<i>me‘ir</i> in Hebrew), which we do not recommend. REB, NBJ, and DUCL emend “of the city” to read “from Ar” (<i>me‘ar</i> in Hebrew). (The city of Ar is mentioned in 21.15, 28). This change is unnecessary (so HOTTP).”</p>	<p>HOTTP, with {A} rating, reads MT “from the city” (not “from Ar”), and comments about the meaning: “<u>either ... “until there is no longer a city”, as in Is 7:8 ... or ... “he will make the (last) survivor disappear out of the city</u> (where he would have sought shelter)”. Ashley translates: “he will destroy the remnant from the city”, and points out : “For ‘<i>ir</i>, “city,” some scholars read Ar, as mentioned above in 21:28. Albright moves the line “he will destroy the remnant from the city” to v. 17b after “all the sons of Sheth” (“Oracles,” p. 220 n. 91); cf. <i>BHS</i>.”</p>	<p><i>Either</i>: express the idea of killing the last people, e.g. like NCV (“... and will destroy <u>those left in the city</u>”) (cf. NIV), <i>or</i>: follow the collective understanding, e.g. like FRCL (“he exterminates <u>the last inhabitants of their [the Edomites’] cities.</u>”), <i>or</i>: express the idea of destroying the city itself, e.g. like NJPS (“To wipe out <u>what is left of Ir.</u>”) (cf. HOTTP).</p>