

## MOAB, MOABITES

### Judges

The Baker Illustrated Bible Dictionary

#### The Geography of Moab

**Undisputed territory.** Moab proper lies between the Arnon and the Zered valleys east of the Dead Sea. The Arnon is the deepest gorge in Jordan (seventeen hundred feet) and is two miles wide at the upper edge. It served as a natural northern boundary for geopolitical Moab, even though the nation frequently expanded its control farther north. The canyon eventually splits into four branches, “the wadis [NIV mg.: “ravines”] of the Arnon” (Num. 21:14–15 NASB). The Zered to the south is the only river in Jordan that constituted a permanent political border.

The average elevation of Moab is about thirty-two hundred feet, with some mountains nearing four thousand feet. Moab receives considerably more rain (sixteen inches per year) than do the eastern fringes of Israel, as moisture is picked up from the humid Jordan Valley and the Dead Sea by the prevailing westerly winds. The band of arable land is narrow because the terrain next to the Rift Valley is rugged. Cities in Moab were among places mentioned as suitable for livestock for the two and one-half tribes settling in Transjordan (Num. 32:1–4).

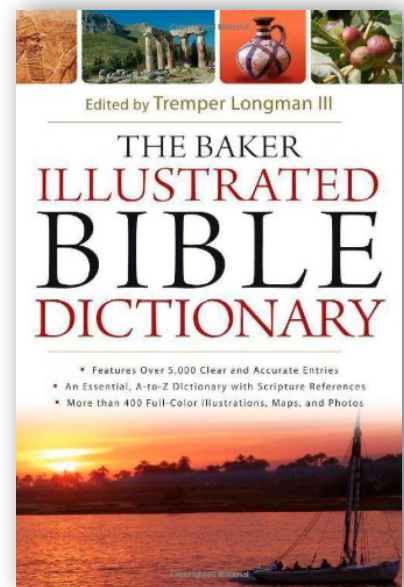
**The plateau and plains of Moab.** When mishor refers to the plateau of Moab, it always has the definite article in Hebrew (Deut. 3:10; 4:43; Josh. 13:9, 16, 17, 21; Jer. 48:8, 21). The plateau begins where the foothills of Gilead end and extends south to the Arnon Gorge. The desert boundary to the east fluctuates somewhat, depending on wet or dry years. The average elevation is about twenty-six hundred feet, with an average rainfall of fourteen to sixteen inches. In the biblical period, primary contenders for control of this region were Moabites and Israelites. The Moabites considered the plateau part of their territory, with their northern boundary reaching the foothills of Gilead.

The “plains [‘arebot] of Moab” (Num. 22:1; 26:3; 31:12; 33:48–50; 36:13; Deut. 34:1; Josh. 13:32) could refer to the southeastern corner of the Jordan Valley below the plateau opposite Jericho. Nevertheless, because the Hebrew preposition ‘al, used repeatedly in the Numbers passages, can mean “above,” it might refer to plains “above” the Jordan opposite Jericho—in other words, part of the plateau. This makes more sense in light of the events that unfolded while the Israelites were camped there. Both expressions are indicative that the name of Moab was attached to territories beyond the strictly political boundaries.

#### The History of Moab in the Bible

**Origins of the Moabites.** After the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot’s daughters determined to carry on the family line by sleeping with their father (Gen. 19:30–38). The son of the elder daughter was named “Moab.” According to an etymology in the LXX, the name in Hebrew means “from my father” (Gen. 19:37).

**The exodus and the conquest.** Moses’ song refers to leaders of Moab among those whom Israel would encounter (Exod. 15:15). As the Israelites made their way past Edom (Num. 20:14–21), they may also have given a wide berth to geopolitical Moab, moving instead along the desert highway to the east (Num. 21:10–20; Deut. 2:8–9; Judg. 11:18; but see also Deut. 2:29) until they arrived at the territory that Sihon, king of the Amorites, had previously captured from the Moabites (Num. 21:21–26). This is the plateau (Heb. mishor) north of the Arnon (Deut. 2:36) stretching to Ammon (Josh. 13:10). The capital city of Sihon was Heshbon on the plateau (mishor) (Josh. 13:21). After defeating the Amorites, the Israelites camped on the “plains of Moab” (Num. 22:1; 33:48–50), where they remained until crossing the Jordan River. Most likely they did not jeopardize their security by moving down into the Jordan Valley.



Frightened by this multitude, the king of Moab and the elders of Midian sent for Balaam to curse the Israelites (Num. 21–24). Instead, Balaam pronounced four sets of blessings on Israel, and in the final one Balaam spoke of a “star . . . out of Jacob” who would “crush the foreheads of Moab” (Num. 24:17). Because the Moabites refused to welcome the Israelites and hired Balaam, the Moabites, along with Ammonites, were excluded from the assembly of the Lord for ten generations (Deut. 23:3–6). The verse immediately prior to this passage excludes those born of forbidden marriages, which might be the reason for specifying Moab and Ammon.

The plateau (mishor) was allocated to the tribes of Reuben and Gad (Num. 32:34–38; Josh. 13:8–9). Their presence enabled the Israelites to maintain a hold in the region, a fact that would be significant some three centuries later (Judg. 11:26). As the Israelites prepared to enter the land, Moses restated the covenant on the plains of Moab (Num. 36:13; Deut. 29:1). When it came time for Moses to die, he climbed Mount Nebo from the plains of Moab to the top of Pisgah, and after his death the Israelites mourned him there for thirty days (Deut. 34:1–8).

**The judges through the monarchy.** During the period of the judges, the Moabites pushed north across the Arnon and as far as Jericho. When Ehud killed Eglon, the Moabites were driven back and subjected to Israel for eighty years (Judg. 3). The respite was temporary, however, due to repeated apostasy on the part of the Israelites. They turned to worship the gods of the peoples around them, among them the gods of the Moabites (Judg. 10:6). At some point during the period of the judges, relations between Israel and Moab were sufficiently friendly that the family of Elimelek could take refuge there during the famine in Judah (Ruth 1). When all the men of the family died, the Moabite Ruth converted to the worship of Yahweh (Ruth 1:16), which meant that she could indeed become part of the congregation of Israel, overcoming the restriction in Deut. 23:3–6.

Ruth’s son was Obed, the father of Jesse, the father of David (Ruth 4:21). This family link with Moab may explain why David sought refuge for his father and mother in Moab in the dark days when he was fleeing from Saul (1 Sam. 22:1–4). David was appealing to a national enemy in doing this since Saul had been fighting against the Moabites along with the Ammonites, the Edomites, and the Philistines since he became king (1 Sam. 14:47). The complexity created for David by this combination of family allegiances and ongoing national concerns is evident in his later actions as king. When he defeated the Moabites, he brutally subdued them, reducing them to a vassal kingdom (2 Sam. 8:2–12). The united kingdom continued to control the plateau of Moab, evident in the towns noted in David’s census; it reached through the tribe of Gad to the city of Aroer in the Arnon Gorge (2 Sam. 24:5).

Solomon built places of worship for the gods of his wives, among them Chemosh, “the vile god of Moab” (2 Kings 23:13). As a result, God removed all but the southern kingdom of Judah from the Davidic dynasty and the plateau of Moab came under the control of the northern kingdom for more than half a century. The Moabite Stone, discovered in the nineteenth century AD at Dibon, indicated that Omri, king of Israel, conquered the plateau of Medeba and reestablished connections with the tribe of Gad. This continued until near the end of Ahab’s reign. Although the Moabite Stone indicates that Mesha revolted during the reign of Ahab, the biblical text puts it after Ahab’s death. The revolt prompted an alliance between Joram and Jehoshaphat to subdue Moab (2 Kings 3:4–27).

The prophets and after the exile. Moab is the object of stinging rebuke from several prophets (Isa. 15–16; 25:10; Jer. 48; Ezek. 25:8–11; Amos 2:1–3). Moab’s forthcoming judgment is described in grim terms, equating Moab’s end to that of Sodom and Gomorrah (Zeph. 2:9). Even so, God declares, “I will restore the fortunes of Moab in days to come” (Jer. 48:47). Moab will be humbled along with Edom and the Philistines at the word of the Lord (Pss. 60:8; 108:9). After the return from exile, Moabites were among those with whom the Israelites intermarried (Ezra 9:1; Neh. 13:1; cf. Deut. 23:3–6).