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The case for a Hebrew geographical-linguistic Division \*

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THE CASE FOR A HEBREW GEOGRAPHICAL-LINGUISTIC DIVISION

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Recommendation by UNGEGN

At its 12th Session, in Geneva, September 1986, the UN Group of Experts on Geographical Names, acting upon a recommendation by Prof. S. Erinc, Chairman of the geographical-linguistic division "Asia South-West, other than Arabic", proposed to divide this unit into two separate divisions - Asia SW, and the Hebrew Division (see [1]). Chapter IV, para. 1.2 of the Statutes of UNGEGN provides for just such a case. The present paper is intended to present the arguments in support of the UNGEGN proposal for a Hebrew Division, and to consolidate the basis for implementing it.

It was correctly pointed out that no coherence exists between the main language groups represented in the present unit as composed since its inception in 1967 (when there were 14 Divisions, three of these having since been divided into two for similar reasons). These are the Turco-Farsi languages on the one hand, and Hebrew on the other. Furthermore, as Prof. Erinc pointed out, these linguistic entities relate to different geographical regions. The first extends over the mostly mountainous contiguous north-western, northern and eastern parts of the area covered by the present Division, while the second is used in the lowlands and hilly areas of the south-west.

From a linguistic aspect, Hebrew stands somewhere in the middle between the Farsi languages - thus, all its letters have a counterpart in the Persian alphabet - and Arabic, with which it shares many word roots and an appreciable part of its grammar, but differing in a number of basic phonemes. The vowels are distinct from those of both other groups.

Historical Considerations

However, geographical names reflect much more than pure linguistic principles and features. One of the basic factors bonding a toponymic framework within a closed perimeter is its historical background. This relates on the one hand to the etymology of its

component elements, and on the other to the ties generated through time with other frameworks. These ties can be either spatial or temporal, or both time-and-space related. In this respect Hebrew presents a case of its own, and therefore merits the dissociation from Turco-Farsi languages as proposed by UNGEGN at its 12th Session.

Historically, i.e. from a temporal viewpoint, Hebrew place names in Israel today have perhaps the longest continually recorded documentation in toponomastics. Such names as Dan (=Judge), Be'er-Sheva' (=Well of Pledge), Yerushalayim [Jerusalem] (=City of Peace), Bet-Shemesh (=House of the Sun), Gat (=Wine Press), Yafo [Jaffa] (=the Pretty), Gezer (a Cutting) and many more - were all well-documented already in the Middle and Late Bronze Age, i.e. as early as the beginning of the 2nd millennium B.C. Most were mentioned in the name lists of Thutmose III; many are mentioned in the el-Amarna Tablets. They, and many others, appear in the Bible - mostly in the Old Testament, and some in the New. While some of the names underwent changes in time, many re-emerged in their old Hebrew form, by which they are known today, and in which they appear in Israeli and international maps and atlases. Thus, Megiddo became the Roman Legio and the Arabic Lajjun, reverting to Megiddo. Jerusalem became Hierosolyma, Aelia Capitolina, Beit al-Maqdas, al-Quds, and, in Crusader and modern times, Jerusalem once more. Kinneret, the Lake of Galilee, became Ginnosar and Gennesareth (which today is an exonym) and again Kinneret. Bet-She'an converted to Scythopolis, Beisan and back to Bet-She'an.

#### From Paradise to Hell -

#### World-wide Connections of Hebrew Place Names

Not less interesting, and even more relevant to the present topic, are the spatial connections of Hebrew place names. Branching out from the "mother country" in the 12th and 11th centuries B.C. we find Rabbath Bene Ammon (Capital of the Children of Ammon) which became Rabbat Ammon, Hellenistic-Roman Philadelphia and Arabic 'Amman, today capital of Jordan; Tadmor which became Palmyra in Syria; and others.

When Israel, and later, in the 6th cent. B.C., Judah went into exile, they carried with them Hebrew place names such as Tel-Aviv (Hill of Spring) in Babylon (Ezekiel 3,15; the place is now lost). Similarly, after the conquest of the country by the Romans who named it Palaestina (Palestine, derived from the Philistia of the Philistines), and part of which reverted to present-day Israel, the name Zion (=Jerusalem) was carried into exile. The name Marazion (=Bitter Zion), a village on the southern coast of Cornwall, U.K., is said to have originated with Israeli exiles who arrived in Britain with the Romans in quest of tin.

However, the main impetus to an accelerated diffusion of Hebrew place names throughout the world was the spread of Christianity on the one hand, and European colonisation on the other. As will be shown in a separate paper [2], Christianity transported many Hebrew toponyms (and also patronyms) to the European centres of faith: France, Germany, Italy (mostly patronyms), Britain (which, in Wales, has some of the most interesting Biblical Hebrew toponyms), and others.

During and after the Crusades, in the 12th and 13th centuries, some European knights, on return from the Holy Land, brought home with them place names which they then implanted in their fiefs. The 1:25,000 scale Topographic Map of France can be cited as an interesting example of evidence [3].

When European countries began their colonial expansion, they carried with them overseas many more Biblical place names than they had ever used at home. Today we find some of the greatest concentrations of Hebrew place names in the United States, where Leighly [4] counted 803 Biblical place namings which utilise 101 different names. Other concentrations are found in Canada, in Australia, and to a lesser degree in South and East Africa (e.g. Kenya), as well as in the former Spanish and Portuguese colonies of Central and South America and East Asia. Some countries widely use Hebrew and other Biblical patronyms in place names, mostly of Christian Saints. Thus, a list of 470 place names in Austria, nearly all derived from Hebrew personal names, was assembled by Jordan [5] - who himself carries a Biblical toponym!

Not all such place names are religion-based. Various Hebrew names are used in an allegorical mode, spanning the spectrum from Eden (=Paradise), inter alia in NSW, Australia, to Tophet (=Hell) e.g. in Mass., USA.

#### Names Treatment by UNGEGN

Another interesting aspect of Hebrew toponyms should be mentioned, requiring treatment of the type dealt with by the UN Group of Experts on Geographical Names.

It will be seen that various Hebrew place names, often somewhat distorted, constitute official names in their respective countries, but in the Holy Land, where they originated, they would constitute exonyms of the respective cities or towns. Thus, Jerusalem, Jerusaleum and Jerusalem, found in many countries, is officially Yerushalayim in Israel. Belem (Portuguese), Belen (Spanish), Bethlehem, Bedlam (English), and Bethlehem, Bettelheim (German) is Bet-Lehem in Hebrew and Bayt Lahm in Arabic. Nazareth is Nazerat (Hebrew) and an-Nasira (Arabic) in Israel, etc.

The question of how a Hebrew atlas should render such names outside Israel, and to what extent proper Hebrew place names should be used as exonyms is, therefore, still open to discussion and may require the cooperation of toponymists from other geographical-linguistic Divisions. Open also is the question which allonyms from among foreign forms should be used in Israel as exonyms, e.g. Tiberias or Tiberiade for Teverya; Joppe or Jaffa for Yafo, etc.

### Conclusion

Hebrew constitutes a geographically-based linguistic entity, being characterised by, but also sharing with many other countries, problems of a historical-toponomastic nature, as well as questions in the practical context of modern map, atlas and gazetteer production. Moreover, Hebrew linguistic culture has contributed markedly to the field of international toponymy and toponomastics (among others by pioneering work in the area of computer-generated gazetteers) within the work of UNGEGN and the UN Conferences on the Standardisation of Geographical Names. Therefore Hebrew should be accorded a separate geographical-linguistic Division.

### References

- [1] Report of the UN Group of Experts on Geographical Names on the Work of its 12th Session. Document ESA/RT/C/GN/10, United Nations, New York, 17 Dec. 1986.
- [2] Kadmon, N.: The Global Transplantation of Hebrew Place Names: an Example of Diffusion in Cultural Geography (in preparation).
- [3] 1:25,000 Scale Topographic Map of France, Sheet XXV 22 1-2 Cosne-sur-Loire
- [4] Leighly, J.: Biblical place names in the United States.
- [5] Jordan, P.: Personal communication.