SHORT NOTES

A NOTE ON BAT-RABBÎM (SONG OF SONGS VII 5)

The Hebrew of the second part of Song of Songs vii 5 reads:

\[ \text{\`ynyk brkwâ bhi\'bwn} \]
\[ \text{\`l \`s\'r bt rhy\'m}. \]

The beginning of the sentence is usually translated,

Your eyes are (like) pools at Heshbon.

In other words, Heshbon is unproblematically accepted as the well attested toponym. On the other hand, the compound bt rhy\'m of the end of the sentence is made a problem precisely by this understanding of the first part. The problem has been noticed already in the ancient translations, which sometimes render the compound verbatim as "daughter of multitude(s)" or similarly. Most modern commentators explain bt rhy\'m as a toponym, in parallelism with Heshbon. They variously accept bt rhy\'m as a synonym for Heshbon; assign a village status to it (cf. Num. xxi 25 and similar passages),\(^1\) attribute to it a conjectured location,\(^2\) or simply admit that the location of this village or town cannot be identified.\(^3\) Hence, the Hebrew phrase bt rhy\'m is usually retained, and the translation reads,

by the gate of Bat Rabbim.

The many biblical examples of personifying a territory or town as bt, "daughter" (of Zion, Babylon, Tyre, Jerusalem, Egypt, Judah), together with the understanding of villages as "daughters", are indeed indications for accepting bt rhy\'m here as a poetic appellation for "town, city". But what about the second component, rhy\'m, which has gone largely unexplained since the literal translations of the ancient versions? I suggest that this second component is the key for the geographical identification of the town referred to; and that this town is none other than Rabbah, the capital of the Ammonites or, more specifically, of "the sons of Ammon".

The basic consonantal affinity of rhy\'m and rbh is unmistakable. I cannot account for a reasonably convincing process, poetic or scribal, by which the latter was presumably transmuted into the

\[ \text{Vetus Testamentum XLII, 1 (1992)} \]
former. I submit, nevertheless and by way of an hypothesis, that the source text for this sentence may have read,

Your eyes are [like] pools at Heshbon,
by the gate of Bat Rabbah.

Although such a source text cannot be substantiated by any direct evidence, there exists circumstantial support within other biblical passages for positing "Rabbah" as the second reference and, perhaps, even textual component of the pair.

To begin with, it can be pointed out that the towns Heshbon and Rabbah, although one Moabite and the second Ammonite, are only some kilometres apart from each other. The geographic proximity as well as the alleged ancestry of each and both (Gen. xix 29-38) probably facilitates their listing in close literary proximity, such as in Deut. iii 3 (and cf. Num. xxi) and Josh. xiii. It would seem that, even in those prose passages, a literary convention of pairing off Heshbon and Rabbah became more and more prevalent. It is also worth noting that, in a prophecy concerning Ammon, both Heshbon and Rabbah appear firmly linked. In Jer. xlix: 2-3 we read,

Therefore, behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will cause the battle cry to be heard against Rabbah of the Ammonites... "Wail, O Heshbon, for Ai is laid waste! Cry, O daughters of Rabbah...”.

Like the Song of Songs passage under discussion (and unlike the other passages quoted above), the Jeremiah passage is poetic. In both—if my suggestion is accepted—the axis of Heshbon/Bat Rabbim = Rabbah transcends ethnic and geographic grounds. Heshbon and Rabbah become interchangeable: not as synonyms for the same location, but in the sense that both lose some specificity as toponyms, which happens elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible also. As in the cases of Jonah’s Nineveh and Daniel’s Babylon, factors of geographic specificity are secondary to those of emotive connotations. In S. of S. vii 5 the two cities function as a conventional metaphor, to designate foreign (Transjordanian) places, located outside Israel proper. And these places, once upon a time taken over from our relatives and enemies, are replete with hostile connotations we are supposed to feel towards those same neighbouring towns and their erstwhile inhabitants. The emotions evoked, I think, are neither positive nor automatically neutral.