

# 34 Jabbok

## Names (also known as)

The Jabbok is known as the Zarqa river.

## Etymology

In Hebrew the name signifies “pouring out” or “emptying”. Jacob was to be emptied of the “Syrian” by the events of this place. Some suggest it is from the root *abak* – to wrestle or struggle (the verb translated “wrestled” in Gen. 32:24).

Modern Arabic name, Zarqa which means “the blue river”.

## Location/Description



Jabbok is the second largest tributary of the lower Jordan River, after the Yarmouk River. It is the third largest river in the region by annual discharge, and its watershed encompasses the most densely populated areas east of the Jordan River.

It rises in the springs near Amman, and flows through a valley (Jabbok River) into the

Jordan, at an elevation of 1090 metres (3580 ft) lower. Today the river is heavily polluted.

Source of the river is Ain Ghazal (“Gazelle Spring”) in Jordan, and the mouth is the Jordan River. The river is 65 km (40 miles) long.

## Scriptural references

### Old Testament

Gen. 32:22; Num. 21:24; Deut. 2:37; 3:16; Josh. 12:2; Jud. 11:13,22.

### New Testament

None

## Famous characters

Jacob, Sihon, King of Ammon



## Spiritual significance

It was here that Jacob learnt the greatest lesson of his life and had his name changed. During the longest night of his life he meticulously prepared to meet his brother Esau whom he suspected intended him harm, even after a 40 year absence.

Jacob sent 5 herds of animals as a gift to Esau with the herdsmen given strict instructions to preface their remarks with the words “My lord Esau”. Jacob was repudiating the stolen blessing – “Let people serve thee, and nations bow down to thee: be lord over thy brethren” (Gen. 27:29) and giving up some of “the fatness of the earth” too in the hope Esau would show brotherly forgiveness.

After sending over the Jabbok all his family into the face of danger, he lingered in the hope of encountering the angels whom he had just seen at Mahanaim. An angel initiated wrestling with Jacob that lasted until the dawn was breaking because Jacob would not let him go despite the pain of a dislocated hip until he received a blessing. The change of

name to Israel memorialised the fact that Jacob finally realised all his own preparations and plans were useless unless Yahweh delivered him from the hand of Esau (Jer. 31:11). Thus, as his new name indicated, he prevailed with God by supplications and weeping (Hos. 12:3-4) not by self-reliance.

Though in pain, and limping upon his thigh, unable to hurry to the defence of his family, all turned out well. Yahweh redeemed him from the hand of Esau. Jacob is a type of his people of the latter days who similarly must pass through “the time of Jacob’s trouble” that they might be redeemed and cease to trust in their own ingenuity and strength – Mic. 4:6-7; Zeph. 3:19-20.

### Brief history

The Zarqa River is identified with the biblical river Jabbok (Hebrew: יַבּוֹק). Jacob crossed the Jabbok on his way back to Canaan, after leaving Haran. It leads west into the Sukkot Valley, from where one crosses over the Jordan and can easily reach Shechem, as Jacob eventually did. The biblical cities of Zaretan and Adam are also at the mouth of the valley.

The river is first mentioned in connection with the meeting of Jacob and Esau, and with the struggle of Jacob with the angel (Gen. 32:23). It was the boundary separating the territory of Reuben and Gad from that of Ammon (Deut. 3:16), the latter being described as lying along the Jabbok (Num. 21:24; Deut. 2:37; 3:16; Josh. 12:2). The territory of Sihon is described as extending “from Arnon unto Jabbok” (Num. 21:24), and it was reclaimed later by the King of Ammon (Judges 11:13, 22).

The river flows to the north before heading west. Rising on the eastern side of the mountains of Gilead, it runs a course of about 105 kilometers (65 miles) in a wild and deep ravine before flowing into the Jordan River between Gennesaret and the Dead Sea, at a point 1,090 meters (3,576 ft) below its origin. At its higher reaches, the river banks are mostly steep and canyon like.

Near Ain Ghazal, two tributary wadis join the river, and it opens up into a shallow basin. It forms the border between the Jordanian administrative regions of Irbid and Balqa Governorate.

The river is perennial, but with a very low base flow of about 2 to 3 million cubic metres per month during the summer months, and as much as 5 to 8 million cubic meters per month

during the rainy winter months. The total basin area is 3,900 km<sup>2</sup> (1,500 sq. mile) the largest in Jordan. A small dam, Al-Rwyha Dam, near the village of Dayr Alla, marks the end of the upstream portion of the river, where it is natural and fast flowing with very clear water. There is very little agriculture along the banks of the river in this region, which are very rocky.

Downstream from this dam, the water level is very low, and the river banks are intensively used for agriculture, as well as grazing by sheep and goats. The King Talal Dam was built across the lower Zarqa in 1970. When built, it was expected that the reservoir would supply water for municipal use in the Amman region. However, the current levels of pollution in the lake make the water unfit for human consumption, and it is used for irrigation only.

Zarqa, Jordan's second largest city, is built on the banks of the Zarqa River, and is the largest settlement along its course. Today, most of the land and plantations on the riverbanks are owned by the heirs of the patrician El-wir clan, the rest is owned by Bani-Hassan tribe, and other local tribes. The town of Zarqa was founded in 1902 by Chechen immigrants.

Its population grew rapidly with an influx of Palestinian refugees who fled the West bank during the Six-day war. The Zarqa River also flows through Jerash. Inhabited since the Bronze Age, Jerash was an important Greco-Roman city (Gerasha), home to noted mathematician Nicomachus. The ruins of the city are well preserved and have been extensively excavated.

### Sources:

Oxford History of the Biblical World - Michael Coogan 2001, pg. 10.

Place names of the World – Adrian Room, 2006 pg. 42.

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