

Excavating a Battle: The Intersection of Textual Criticism, Archaeology, and Geography

The Problem of Hill City

Just as similarities or variant forms of personal names can create textual problems, the same is true of geographic names. A case in point is the confusion of Gibeah (גִּבְעָה) and Geba (גִּבְעָה). Both names mean “Hill City”, an appropriate name for a city in the hill country of Benjamin, where other cities are named Lookout (Mizpah) and Height (Ramah). Adding to the mix is the related name Gibeon (גִּבְעוֹן). The situation is clarified (or confused further) by the modifiers that are sometimes added to the names. The difficulty of keeping these cities distinct is increased by textual problems. Sometimes “Geba” may be used for “Gibeah,” and vice versa.

To complicate matters further there are other Gibeah/Geba’s in Israel (Joshua 15:57—Gibeah in Judah, Joshua 24:33 —Gibeath in Ephraim).

That Gibeah and Geba in Benjamin are two different places is demonstrated by Joshua 18:24, 28, which lists both Geba (גִּבְעָה) and Gibeah (here in the form גִּבְעָת) among the cities of Benjamin. Isaiah 10:29 also distinguishes Geba from Gibeah of Saul (גִּבְעַת שְׂאִיִּל). The Gibeah we are discussing here is near the central ridge, near Ramah, north of Jerusalem. Geba is further east on the edge of the wilderness, near a descent to the Jordan Valley. It is across the valley from Michmash.



Gibeah

Gibeah is Saul’s capital near Ramah. It is a restoration of the Gibeah destroyed in Judges. It is believed to be located at Tel el Ful. This Gibeah is called Gibeah of Saul in 1 Samuel 11: 4, 15:34, 21:6, and Isaiah 10:29. It is associated with Saul in 1 Samuel 10:26 and 22:6. It is called Gibeah of Benjamin or Gibeah which belongs to Benjamin in Judges 19:12-16, 20:4,10, and it is associated with this Gibeah in Hosea 5:8, 9:9, and 10:9. The following fifteen passages seem to refer to this Gibeah:

Jo 18:28 Gibeah (Gibeath) is a city in Benjamin.

Jud 19-20 Gibeah or Gibeah in Benjamin is referred to five times in the account of Israel’s attack on Gibeah for its gross immorality.

1 Sa 11:4 Gibeah of Saul is the site to which a report on the plight of Jabesh is delivered.

1 Sa 13:2 “Gibeah in Benjamin” plays a role in the battle of Michmash against the Philistines. Saul is with 2,000 at Michmash and in Bethel’s hill country, and Jonathan at “Gibeah of Benjamin”. Jonathan attacks the Philistine garrison that was in Geba. The problem is “where is Jonathan?” Is he at the more distant

Gibeah of Saul or is he at Geba of Benjamin, close to the Philistine garrison as the reading of the LXX (Γαβεε) suggests.¹ See further discussion below.

- 1 Sa 14:2 Saul is at the outskirts of “the Gibeah” or “on the hill” (בִּקְצֵה הַגְּבֵעָה) at Migron as Jonathan attacks the Philistines at Geba. Migron may be between Gibeah and Geba. It does not seem to be the same as the Migron in Isaiah 10.
- 1 Sa 14:16 Saul’s watchmen at Gibeah of Benjamin (LXX has ἐν Γαβεε) see the route/rout of the Philistines retreating from Geba. See further discussion below.
- 1 Sa 15:34 Saul goes home to Gibeah of Saul.
- 1 Sa 22:6 Saul is sitting under a tamarisk tree in Gibeah.
- 1 Sa 23:19 Ziphites go to Saul at Gibeah. Also in 1 Sa 26:1.
- 2 Sa 21:6 Saul’s descendents are hung at Gibeah of Saul.
- 2 Sa 23:29 Gibeah of the sons of Benjamin is the hometown of Ittai, son of Ribai (1Chr 11:31)
- 2 Ch 13:2 Uriel of Gibeah is an in-law of the royal family
- Hos 5:8 “Blow the horn at Gibeah” which is near Rama.
- Hos 9:9 “the corrupt days of Gibeah” is an allusion to the story in Judges
- Hos 10:9 “sin since the days of Gibeah” is an allusion to the story in Judges

The two problem passages are 1 Samuel 13:2 and 14:2 (this issue will be addressed further below). There is one other incidental problem. Where should we locate Gibeah of God? It is mentioned in 1 Samuel 10:5 (and 10:10 where it is simply called Gibeah). It is identified as a place with a garrison of Philistines. Saul meets some prophets there. It would seem natural that it is called “Gibeah of God” to distinguish it from the other Gibeah/Geba’s, but some have equated this place with Gibeah of Saul, with Geba (because there was a Philistine garrison there later in the story), or even with Gibeon, with which Saul had a family connection (1Chr 9:35). Perhaps it is none of these places, but some other site, perhaps even as far west as Nebi Samwil, which may have been the location of a shrine associated with nearby Gibeon. Since Gibeah of God is a one-passage site, its location has little effect on the Gibeah/Geba problem overall. Of the four options listed above I favor the Nebi Samwil location.

Geba

Geba was a city of Benjamin lying along the northern boundary (Jos 28:24). Geba and its suburbs were allotted to the priests (Jos 21:17; 1 Chron. 6:60). It is mentioned in 2 Kings 23: 8 as the northern landmark of the kingdom of Judah, in opposition to Beer-sheba, the southern. It is referred to in 2 Samuel 5:25 as the eastern limit of Israel’s heartland, in opposition to Gezer, the western limit. This description of the topography of Geba agrees with that given in Isaiah 10: 28, 29. Geba is identified *Jeba*, situated on a hill, opposite of which there is a village called *Mukhmas*, the biblical Michmash. Geba is on a plateau just west of Suweinat Canyon. In the time of Saul, Geba was occupied by the Philistines (1 Sa 13:3), who were driven out by Jonathan. This incident is the focus of this study. But before we get to that we will survey the references to Geba.

Jos 18:24-28 Geba, Gibeon, and Gibeath are all in Benjamin.

¹ The Greek renditions of Gibeah and Geba, however, are not consistent.

- Jos 21:17 Geba and Gibeon in Benjamin are for the priests.
- Jud 20:10 Gibeah in Benjamin is required by the context, but most Hebrew manuscripts have Geba, one has Gibeah. NIV ESV HCSB read Gibeah. NIV has a note of the variant. Other verses in the chapter refer to Gibeah, so this seems to be an error of גבעה for גבע.
- Jud 20:33 According to MT an attack is launched on Gibeah of Benjamin from “west of Geba” (מִצְעָרֵהָ־גִבְעָה). NIV emends to the reading to Gibeah, since it believes the attack is launched on Gibeah from the west not from the east. Israel’s base was a Mizpeh, north of Gibeah, so either direction may be plausible. This may be to be a verse where Geba has been wrongly substituted for Gibeah, but LXX also has Geba.
- 1 Sa 13:2 “Gibeah in Benjamin” or “Geba in Benjamin” plays a role in the battle of Michmash against the Philistines. Saul is with 2,000 men at Michmash and Bethel’s hill country, and Jonathan is at Gibeah of Benjamin. Jonathan soon thereafter attacked the Philistine garrison that was in Geba. The problem is “where is Jonathan?” Is he at Gibeah of Saul, more distant from Geba, or is he at Geba of Benjamin, close to the Philistine garrison, as the reading of the LXX (Γαβεε) suggests. See further discussion below.
- 1 Sa 13:3 Geba is in the vicinity of Jonathan’s attack on the Philistines (also 14:5).
- 1Sa 13:16 Most Hebrew manuscripts have Geba as the location of Saul’s troops shortly before the battle of Michmash, but two have Gibeah, which NIV follows. Geba by Michmash seems most likely. The Israelites could not be blocking the Philistines from cutting Israel in half if they were at Gibeah. See summary below.
- 2 Sa 5:25 David pursues the Philistines from Geba on the east to Gezer on the west. LXX and NIV have the pursuit beginning at Gibeon, agreeing with 1 Chronicles 14:16. For a battle fought near Jerusalem Gibeon makes better sense as the starting point of the flight than Geba, which is too far east. This may be a case of a faulty writing in MT.
- 2 Kg 23:8 “from Geba to Beersheva” designates the north-south limits of the kingdom of Judah

There are other geographic references to Geba which do not add to the problem nor provide any solutions our questions here:

- 1Kg 15:22: Asa builds Geba in Benjamin and Mizpeh (also 2 Chr 16:6);
- 1 Ch 6:60 and 8:6 refer to Geba in Benjamin;
- Ezr 2:26 lists people from Geba, Ramah, Michmash;
- Neh 7:10,11:31, and 12:29 refer to people from Geba;
- Is 10:29 has the sequence Geba, Ramah, Gibeah of Saul;
- Zech 14:10 the whole land from Geba to Rimmon, south of Jerusalem.

Several passages in which one or the other name occurs are considered doubtful by some.

Some feel that Geba should be Gibeah in:

- Jos 21:17 Geba and Gibeon in Benjamin are for the priests.
- 1 Ch 6:60 (LXX 45) Geba is for the priests
- 1 Ch 8: 6 refers to Geba in Benjamin
- Ezr 2:26 lists people from Geba, Ramah, Michmash;
- Neh 7:10,11:31, 12:29 refer to people from Geba.

Some feel Gibeah should be Geba in:

- 2 Sa 23:29 Gibeah of the sons of Benjamin is the hometown of Ittai (1 Chr 11:31)
- 1 Ch 12:3 Shemaah of Gibeah
- 2 Ch 13:2 Uriel of Gibeah.

Gibeon

In some passages “Gibeah” or “Geba” may occur where the reference is to Gibeon.

- Jud 20: 31 Israelites fought against the Benjaminites and took their battle positions against Gibeah as before. ³¹Then the Benjaminites came out against the people and were drawn away from the city. They began to attack the people as before, killing about 30 men of Israel on the highways, one of which goes up to Bethel and the other to *Gibeah* through the open country. Since the flight is *from* Gibeah, it seems it should be *to* Gibeon. There is no manuscript support for this emendation.
- 2 Sa 5:25 David pursues the Philistines from Geba on the east to Gezer on the west. LXX and NIV have Gibeon, agreeing with 1 Chronicles 14:16. For a battle near Jerusalem Gibeon makes better sense as the starting point of the flight than Geba, which is too far east.
- 2 Sa 21:6 Saul’s descendents are hung at Gibeah of Saul. Is there a reason to change this one?

Conclusion



The most important example and test case for the Gibeah/Geba problem is the account of the battle against the Philistines at Michmash in 1 Samuel 13 and 14. Let us conclude our discussion by trying to bring together the geographic and strategic data about this battle. Here is the portion of the text which contains data relevant to our discussion. We will begin by

following the readings of the NIV, noting where textual variants come into play. Does the account make geographic and strategic sense? Do variants change the understanding of the account? Do we need to depart from the MT in some places to make sense of the account?

1 Samuel 13 and 14

²Saul chose three thousand men from Israel; two thousand were with him at Mikmash and in the hill country of Bethel, and a thousand were with Jonathan *at Gibeah in Benjamin*. ³Jonathan attacked the Philistine outpost at *Geba*, and the Philistines heard about it. And the people were summoned to join Saul at Gilgal. ⁵The Philistines camped at Michmash, east of Beth Aven.

If the Philistines have a garrison at Geba, they have already nearly completed a campaign to cut Israel in half. They have driven a wedge between Judah and Ephraim. All that remains for them is to go down the pass from the area of Geba to Gilgal in the Jordan Valley and Israel will be cut in half. The Philistines have already bypassed Saul's stronghold at Gibeah, which lies about 3 miles southwest of Geba. Despite the fact that Saul's stronghold at Gibeah lies behind their front lines, they apparently have an open supply line to Philistia, probably through the Aijalon. At Michmash Saul is in a position to contest any Philistine attempt to move down to the Jordan, but the Philistines are between Saul and his capital at Gibeah. Jonathan attacks the Philistine outpost at Geba from the west, and apparently dislodges them. The Philistines send in reinforcements and set up an encampment at Michmash north of Geba, and Saul retreats down to Gilgal. Israel has presumably retained a presence in Geba. So after the first stage of the campaign the relative positions of the two armies at the mouth of the Suweinit pass have switched. At the beginning Israel was to the north at Michmash and the Philistines to the south at Geba. Now the Philistines are in Michmash and Jonathan is in or near Geba.

All of this makes geographic and strategic sense. Some suggest that the initial Philistine garrison was at Gibeon further west, but the other details of the story suggest that Geba is correct, in spite of the fact that this put Gibeah behind the Philistine forward line. The textual question is "where was Jonathan just before his attack on the Philistines?" Did he launch the attack from the more distant Gibeah of Saul as MT has it or was he at Geba of Benjamin, close to the Philistine garrison, as the reading of the LXX (Γαβεε) suggests. Either is possible. The distances are not great, but I think Geba is the likely reading.

Saul remained at Gilgal. Saul replied, "I saw that the men were scattering, and that you did not come at the set time, and that the Philistines were assembling at Michmash.¹² I thought, 'Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal.'" ¹⁵Then Samuel left Gilgal <> and went up to *Gibeah* in Benjamin, and Saul counted the men who were with him. They numbered about six hundred. ¹⁶Saul and his son Jonathan and the men with them were staying in *Gibeah*^e in Benjamin, while the Philistines camped at Mikmash.

Here the majority of the Hebrew texts of v 16 say the Saul and Jonathan were at Geba opposite Michmash, not at Gibeah as two Hebrew mss and NIV have. Strategically, Israel needed to be at Geba facing the Philistines, but both readings remain possible since armies are not always in ideal locations, and Gibeah was more defensible. According to MT and NIV (v 15) Samuel has gone to Gibeah (Γαβαα), which lies further west. The problem is complicated (or solved) by a significant textual variant.

MT has "Samuel arose and went up from Gilgal <> to Gibeah of Benjamin. And Saul numbered the people who were present with him, about six hundred men.

^e Two Hebrew manuscripts; most Hebrew manuscripts *Geba*, a variant of *Gibeah*

LXX and ESV have “Samuel arose and went up from Gilgal.< *The rest of the people went up after Saul to meet the army; they went up from Gilgal*> to Gibeah of Benjamin. And Saul numbered the people who were present with him, about six hundred men.

It appears that MT has skipped from one “Gilgal” to the next and that we can leave Samuel out of the geographic question. It is Saul and the people who go to גִּבְעַת בְּנֵי־מִנְיָן or Γαβαα Βενιαμιν. In v 16 MT has Saul at גִּבְעַת בְּנֵי־מִנְיָן and LXX has him at Γαβεε Βενιαμιν. Did Saul move from Gibeah to Geba? LXX says that he did move from Γαβαα to Γαβεε which agrees with the main readings of MT. The Israelite forces may have moved to Geba to be closer to the Philistine camp to be in a better blocking position, and Jonathan is positioned there in or near Geba.

²³Now a detachment of Philistines had gone out to the pass at Michmash. One day Jonathan son of Saul said to his young armor-bearer, “Come, let’s go over to the Philistine outpost on the other side.” ^{14:2}Saul was staying on the outskirts of *Gibeah* under a pomegranate tree in Migron. With him were about six hundred men. ⁴On each side of the pass that Jonathan intended to cross to reach the Philistine outpost was a cliff; one was called Bozez and the other Seneh. ⁵One cliff stood to the north toward Michmash, the other to the south toward *Geba*.

The Philistines send a contingent out from their main camp at Michmash to the north edge of the canyon to keep an eye on Israel’s position on the other side. We get the impression that Jonathan’s attack was launched from relatively near to the Philistine position, i.e., from Geba on the south side of the pass. Saul seems to have moved to a position between Geba and Gibeah. He is not in Gibeah proper, but in the environs of Gibeah, or is he on “the hill” (בְּקִצְיָה הַגְּבִיעָה) (ἐπ’ ἄκρου τοῦ βουνοῦ) near Migron? Perhaps the only geographic name here is Migron, and the location of Migron is disputed.

¹⁵Then panic struck the whole [Philistine] army—those in the camp and field, and those in the outposts and raiding parties—and the ground shook. ¹⁶Saul’s lookouts at *Gibeah* in Benjamin saw the army melting away in all directions. ²³So on that day the LORD saved Israel, and the battle moved on beyond Beth Aven. ... ³¹That day, after the Israelites had struck down the Philistines from Michmash to Aijalon.

The LXX places Saul’s lookouts in Geba not Gibeah (ἐν Γαβεε Βενιαμιν). MT places them in Gibeah (גִּבְעַת בְּנֵי־מִנְיָן). Either is possible, but we would expect them to be in the more forward position at Geba. From here the battle precedes westward without further geographic problems. The Philistines who were trying to go down the eastern pass to the Jordan are left fleeing down the western pass to the coast. The account has portrayed the Philistine campaign as an attempt to reverse the campaign of Joshua from Gilgal to the plain, but in a reversal of fortune it is Saul who recapitulates Joshua’s route.

Textual Conclusions

It appears that in the account of the battle of Michmash MT (and/or NIV) three times may have wrongly read Gibeah where they should have Geba.

1 Sa 13:2 Saul is with 2,000 men at Michmash and Bethel's hill country, and Jonathan is either at Gibeah of Benjamin or Geba of Benjamin. Soon thereafter Jonathan attacks the Philistine garrison that was in Geba. "So where was Jonathan when he launched the attack?" Is he at the more distant Gibeah of Saul or is he at Geba of Benjamin, close to the Philistine garrison, as the reading of the LXX (Γαβεε) suggests. NIV, ESV, HCSB all stick with MT's Gibeah, but Geba is preferable.

1 Sa 13:16 Saul and Jonathan are at Geba across from the Philistine forward observation post (most Heb, LXX, ESV, HCSB) not at Gibeah (2 Heb mss, NIV).

1 Sa 14:16 Saul's lookouts should be at Geba (LXX) not at Gibeah (MT, NIV, ESV, HCSB)

There seem to be three other textual errors involving Gibeah v Geba.

Jud 20:10 Gibeah in Benjamin is required by the context, but most Hebrew manuscripts have Geba. One has Gibeah. NIV ESV HCSB read Gibeah. Only NIV has a note of the variant. Other verses in the chapter refer to Gibeah, so this seems to be an error of גבע for גבעה in MT. Gibeah is correct.

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