

# The Doctrine of the City of Mahanaim

Topics		
Hebrew	Location	Scriptural References
The Spiritual Meaning of this City	Ishbosheth in Mahanaim	David and Absalom in Mahanaim
The Possible Song of Solomon Reference		Summaries
Charts, Maps and Doctrines		
	Smith Summarizes the Doctrine of the City of Mahanaim	Nave's Topical Bible Summarizes the City of Mahanaim

**Preface:** The city of Mahanaim seems to be symbolic of the struggle between two things: Jacob's spiritual life and the life he left behind; the angelic conflict; the false kingdom of Ishbosheth versus the kingdom of David; the rebellion of Absalom against his own father David; the struggle between the flesh and the spirit.

1. The Hebrew word is Machānayim (מַחְנַיִם) [pronounced *makh-uh-AH-yim*], which means *two camps*; [possibly, *two armies*]; and is transliterated *Mahanaim*. Strong's #4266 BDB #334.
2. In the Septuagint, the Greek is different in every case where the name occurs. Codex Vaticanus and Codex Alexandrinus also give variant forms
3. Location: my map has Mahanaim in Trans-jordania (east of the Jordan river), in the southern tip of East Manasseh, bordering on Gad, midway between the Sea of Chinnereth and the Dead Sea, about 20–25 miles east of the Jordan. ISBE reasons that since Jacob will go from Mahanaim south, and cross over the Jabbok River, we must reasonably place Mahanaim on the northern shore of the Jabbok or north of the Jabbok.<sup>1</sup> Smith more simply points out that, since Mahanaim is a city in Gad (Joshua 21:38), it must be south of the Jabbok.<sup>2</sup>
  - a. ISBE offers several historical sites: *On the North of the Jabbok several positions have been thought of. Merrill (East of the Jordan, 433 ff) argues in favor of Khirbet Saleikhat, a ruined site in the mouth of Wady Saleikhat, on the northern bank, 3 miles East of Jordan, and 4 miles North of Wady 'Ajlūn. From its height, 300 ft. above the plain, it commands a wide view to the West and South. One running "by the way of the Plain" could be seen a great way off (2Sam. 18:23). This would place the battle in the hills to the South near the Jordan valley. Ahimaaz then preferred to make a detour, thus securing a level road, while the Cushite took the rough track across the heights. Others, among them Buhl (GAP, 257), would place Mahanaim at Miḥneh, a partly overgrown ruin 9 miles East of Jordan, and 4 miles North of 'Ajlūn on the north bank of Wady Maḥneh. This is the only trace of the ancient name yet found in the district. It may be assumed that Mahanaim is to be sought in this neighborhood. Cheyne would locate it at 'Ajlūn, near which rises the great fortress Kal'ater-Rabaḍ. He supposes that the "wood of Mahanaim" extended as far as Miḥneh, and that "the name of Miḥneh is really an abbreviation of the ancient phrase." Others would identify Mahanaim with Jerash, where, however, there are no remains older than Greek-Roman times.*<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*; James Orr, Editor; ©1956 Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; © by Hendrickson Publishers; from E-Sword; Topic: Mahanaim.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. William Smith, *Smith's Bible Dictionary*; 1894; from e-Sword, topic: Mahanaim.

<sup>3</sup> *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*; James Orr, Editor; ©1956 Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; © by Hendrickson Publishers; from E-Sword; Topic: Mahanaim.

- b. ISBE continues: *Objections to either 'Ajlūn or Miḥneh are: (1) The reference to this Jordan" in Gen. 32:10, which seems to show that the city was near the river. It may indeed be said that the great hollow of the Jordan valley seems close at hand for many miles on either side, but this, perhaps, hardly meets the objection. (2) The word kikkaṛ, used for "Plain" in 2Sam. 18:23, seems always elsewhere to apply to the "circle" of the Jordan. Buhl, who identifies Mahanaim with Miḥneh, yet cites this verse (GAP, 112) as a case in which kikkaṛ applies to the plain of the Jordan. He thus prescribes for Ahimaaz a very long race. Cheyne sees the difficulty. The battle was obviously in the vicinity of Mahanaim, and the nearest way from the "wood" was by the כִּכְרָ, kikkaṛ, "or, since no satisfactory explanation of this reading has been offered by the נַחַל, naḥal, that is to say, the eager Ahimaaz ran along in the wady in which, at some little distance, Mahanaim lay" (EB, under the word). The site for the present remains in doubt<sup>4</sup>.*
4. Scriptural references: Gen. 32:2 Joshua 13:26, 30 21:38 2Sam. 2:8, 12, 29 17:24, 27 19:32 1Kings 2:8 4:14 1Chron. 6:80 SoS. 6:13
  5. As Jacob was leaving his Uncle Laban's ranch in Padan Aram, taking with him Laban's two daughters as his wives, Jacob traveled along the Jabbok River, which is perpendicular to the Jordan River, intersecting it about midway between the seas. His eventual destination was the land of Canaan. Along this way, Jacob met with angels of God and called the place where he was, *the camp of God*; and he gave it the name *Mahanaim*, which means *two camps*. It is unclear whether the name refers to *two angels*, to the *two camps* that Jacob divided his company into, or to his *two wives*. Fausset suggests that Jacob divided his company into two camps and that there were two groups of angels, one guarding each camp.<sup>5</sup> One might suggest that the key to the name is a conflict between two things: the human and the divine; or the visible and the invisible agencies involved in Jacob's life. There would always be that constant conflict between Jacob's two wives. There might even be a connection here with Jacob about to meet his twin brother Esau. In any case, throughout the Biblical history of this city, again and again, we see a conflict between two things, often one good and one evil. Gen. 32:2
  6. Mahanaim is named as a city on the border between Gad and East Manasseh in Joshua 13:26, 30.
  7. Properly, Mahanaim belonged to the tribe of Gad and became a Levitical city. Joshua 21:38 1Chron. 6:80
  8. Our passage, 2Sam. 2:8–9, is the next that we hear of this city. Apparently, Abner, having the strength of Saul's army behind him, sets up Ishbosheth there as ruler over Trans-Israel, the capital city being at Mahanaim. From this city, Abner sets up Ishbosheth as [king over Gilead, and over the Ashurites, and over Jezreel, and over Ephraim, and over Benjamin, and over all Israel](#) (2Sam. 2:9). It is possible, since Jabesh-gilead could be counted upon for their loyalty, that Jabesh-gilead was between western Israel and Mahanaim. That is, they would stand as a buffer to the new capital city.
  9. Some soldiers from both sides (those loyal to David and those loyal to Ishbosheth) will meet at the pool of Gibeon and there will be a small altercation—not quite a full-out civil war, but many did die (2Sam. 2:12–17). Although David's men had the upper hand that day, the two groups eventually separated and Abner and the remaining soldiers returned to Mahanaim (2Sam. 2:29).
  10. Ishbosheth, by the way, will be murdered by two of his bodyguards (2Sam. 4:5–7). David did not reward these men for their treachery, but had them executed instead.
  11. Mahanaim is mentioned again in connection with another civil war between David and his son Absalom. Absalom took Jerusalem and David fled, making his headquarters in Mahanaim, where he was sustained by a man named Barzillai. David chose this city possibly because it was a walled city with the ability to provide a safe haven for the large army which was with him. When David's army decisively defeated Absalom's, David grieved there over Absalom's death in battle. 2Sam. 17:22–29
  12. During this time, David had been sustained by Barzillai in Mahanaim; and David brings this man to the King's Palace. 2Sam. 19:32–33
  13. David, near the end of his reign, as he instructed his son Solomon in taking over the throne, asked for Solomon to show grace to Barzillai and to execute Bahurim, who cursed David the day he went to Mahanaim. 1Kings 2:7–9
  14. One of Saul's chief officials, Ahinadab, ruled from Mahanaim, a city over one of the 12 districts which Solomon had set up. 1Kings 4:1, 7, 14

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Robert Fausset, *Fausset's Bible Dictionary*; from e-Sword, topic: Mahanaim.

15. There is one final possible reference: In SoS. 6:13, we read: [Return, return, O Shulamite! Return, return, that we may look on you. What will you see in the Shulamite? As it were the dance of two camps.](#) Or, as the WEB reads: [Return, return, Shulammite! Return, return, that we may gaze at you. Lover Why do you desire to gaze at the Shulammite, as at the dance of Mahanaim?](#) The proper noun does seem to make more sense; however, I don't know what more this tells us about Mahanaim, except perhaps that they have a dance there during the time of Solomon. If this is a reference to Mahanaim, this is the only time it occurs with an article. Fausset explains this: *Though "one" (SoS. 6:9) she is nevertheless "two," the family of Jesus Christ in heaven and that on earth, that militant and that triumphant. Her strength, like Jacob's at Mahanaim, is Christ and His hosts enlisted on her side by wrestling prayer.*<sup>6</sup> I admit, I don't have any idea what he is saying either.
16. There are several good summaries of this topic:

Smith's Bible Dictionary covers this topic in short order:

### Smith Summarizes the Doctrine of the City of Mahanaim

Mahana'im. A town on the east of the Jordan. The name signifies two hosts or two camps, and was given to it by Jacob, because he there met "the angels of God" (Gen. 32:1–2).

We next meet with it, in the records of the conquest (Joshua 13:26, 30). It was within the territory of Gad (Joshua 21:38–39), and therefore, on the south side of the torrent Jabbok.

The town with its "suburbs" was allotted to the service of the Merarite Levites (Joshua 21:39 1Chron. 6:80).

Mahanaim had become in the time of the monarchy a place of mark (2Sam. 2:8, 12). David took refuge there when driven out of the western part of his kingdom by Absalom (2Sam. 17:24 1Kings 2:8).

Mahanaim was the seat of one of Solomon's commissariat officers (1Kings 4:14), and it is alluded to in the song which bears his name (SoS. 6:13). There is a place called Mahneh among the villages of the part of Jordan, through its exact position is not certain.

This summary was taken from Dr. William Smith, *Smith's Bible Dictionary*; 1894; from e-Sword, topic: Mahanaim. I did a small amount of editing.

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Nave gives us a nice summary of this city:

### Nave's Topical Bible Summarizes the City of Mahanaim

The place where Jacob had the vision of angels  
Gen. 32:2

The town of, allotted to Gad  
Joshua 13:26, 30

One of the Levitical cities  
Joshua 21:38

Ishbosheth establishes himself at, when made king over Israel  
2Sam. 2:8–12

David lodges at, at the time of Absalom's rebellion

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Robert Fausset, *Fausset's Bible Dictionary*; from e-Sword, topic: Mahanaim.

## Nave's Topical Bible Summarizes the City of Mahanaim

2Sam. 17:27–29 1Kings 2:8

However, there is one point which is ignored by the sources I checked, and that is the issue of the meaning of the name of Mahanaim and the circumstances as to why it was given that name. From this doctrine: As Jacob was leaving his Uncle Laban's ranch in Padan Aram, taking with him Laban's two daughters as his wives, Jacob traveled along the Jabbok River, which is perpendicular to the Jordan River, intersecting it about midway between the seas. His eventual destination was the land of Canaan. Along this way, Jacob met with angels of God and called the place where he was, *the camp of God*; and he gave it the name *Mahanaim*, which means *two camps*. It is unclear whether the name refers to *two angels*, to the *two camps* that Jacob divided his company into, or to his *two wives*. Fausset suggests that Jacob divided his company into two camps and that there were two groups of angels, one guarding each camp.<sup>1</sup> One might suggest that the key to the name is a conflict between two things: the human and the divine; the visible and the invisible agencies involved in Jacob's life. There would always be that constant conflict between Jacob's two wives. There might even be a connection here with Jacob about to meet his twin brother Esau. In any case, throughout the Biblical history of this city, again and again, we see a conflict between two things, often one good and one evil.

All but the final paragraph are taken from *Nave's Topical Bible*; originally produced by Orville J. Nave (1841-1917), A.M., D.D., LL.D.; originally published in the early 1900's; from E-Sword; Topic: Mahanaim.

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1. Andrew Robert Fausset, *Fausset's Bible Dictionary*; from e-Sword, topic: Mahanaim.