

GOLAN (גֹּלָן, *golan*). A refuge city in Bashan, allotted to Manasseh.

The city name “Golan” may relate, etymologically, to circling or wandering—possibly “enclosure.” In his *Onomasticon*, Eusebius identifies “Gaulon” (Γαύλων, *Gaulōn*) as both a region and “a large village.”

Biblical Relevance

Deuteronomy identifies Golan as one of three refuge cities across the Jordan River. A city of refuge served as a place of safety for individuals who had accidentally killed someone; there, the person could avoid being killed in retaliation (Deut 4:41–43).

The Israelites also established Golan as a Levitical town for the Gershonites; it was one of 48 cities where the Levites, who lacked their own territorial allotment, could settle and pasture their livestock (Josh 21:27; compare 1 Chr 6:56).

Location

Ancient Golan is believed to share locations with modern Sahem el-Joulan (preserving the ancient city name; Schumacher, *The Jaulân*, 1), east of the border of modern Golan Heights, close to Jordan’s northern border.

The region north and east of the Sea of Galilee may have been named “Golan” as early as 886 BC, when the kingdoms of Geshur and Aram conquered Argob of Bashan (or Havvoth-jair; 1 Chr 2:22–23; see Mazar, “Geshur and Maacha,” 121). If so, then Golan became the capital of Geshur and lent its name to the surrounding area.

Josephus identifies a district named Gaulanitis (Γαυλανίτις, *Ganlanitis*) west of modern Sahem el-Joulan, which may complicate identifying the modern city with the ancient village. He divides Gaulanitis into Superior (Northeastern) and Inferior (Southwestern) sections (Josephus, *J.W.*, 4.2).

Gaulanitis extended south from Mount Hermon to the Jordan River and Sea of Galilee on the west, Nahr al ‘Allan in the east, and the Yarmuk River in the south. The region is a basaltic plateau, sloping from 4,000 feet high in the north to 1,000 feet high in the south, for an average height of 2,950 feet (see Schumacher, *Jaulân*, 12). The landscape, which includes volcanic rock formations, cinder cones, and extinct volcanic peaks, does support pasturing, though parts of the rocky territory do not suit extensive agricultural activities.

The district name may also date to the first century BC and Alexander Jannaeus’ conquests. In the first century AD, Philip the Tetrarch and, later, Herod Agrippa I and II ruled the territory.

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