

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

THE LAND OF EDOM.

II. THE EASTERN RANGE—MOUNT 'ESAU.

IN the preceding article,¹ the fact was recalled that the Land of Edom extended from the border of the Arabian Desert westward across both of the Syrian mountain-ranges, with the valley of the 'Arabah between them, towards the coast of the Levant where this stretches from el-'Arish to near Gaza. We have now to consider separately its well-marked divisions; and we begin with the Eastern Range, the Mount 'Esau of Scripture, so much the more essential part of the territory of Edom that many moderns have been misled into considering it the whole.

1. THE GENERAL STRUCTURE AND FEATURES.

This long and narrow mountain is part of the inner Syrian range which runs from Hermon to the Red Sea, and which consists, save for some volcanic extrusions, throughout its entire extent of the same geological structure; deep limestone beds above a deeper sandstone, which in its turn rests upon crystalline rocks, mainly porphyry and granite. The range, as is well known, owes its formation first to a shrinking, and then to a fracture of the earth's surface. Originally a long billow or fold of mountain, which still rises gently, and in parts almost imperceptibly, from the Arabian Desert, all its western flank was torn and deepened by the great crack or "fault," producing the Jordan-'Arabah Valley into which the range still sinks with varying degrees of abruptness. Of this range Mount 'Esau is the southmost section, some 112 miles long from the Wâdy

¹ EXPOSITOR for October. Add to the bibliography given there Friedr. Jeremias in the *Palästina-jahrbuch*, iii. (1907), 135 ff. (not seen); and Dalman, *Petra u. seine Felsheiligtümer* (1908), and "Topographische Notizen zum Wege nach Petra" in the *Z.D.P.V.* xxxi. (1908), 259 ff.

el-Hësa to the Gulf of 'Akaba and from 25 to 30 miles broad.¹

But while thus essentially a part of the inner Syrian range Mount 'Esau is distinguished from all of this to the north of it by several features of its own. In the first place it is entrenched from the plateau of Moab by the greatest of the cañons which cut the range : the Wâdy el-Hësa-Kerâhi.² Nor is it cleft by any other such cañon, as Moab and Gilead are cleft, draining entirely to the Jordan or Dead Sea ; but it throws off its waters both upon the Arabian Desert and into the 'Arabah. Again, Mount 'Esau attains a general elevation of from 4,000 to 5,400 feet above sea-level, which is far higher than that of Hauran,³ Gilead or Moab, and therefore gives it in parts a climate and an aspect not a little different from theirs. The comparative rainfall has not been determined ; but the temperatures of the high plateau which forms the back of the mountain are lower, and in winter the snow lies deeper and for more days at a time than on the rest of the range to the north ;⁴ while summer

¹ These measurements are made from Musil's map. Buhl, p. 2 (see above, p. 335) gives the length as about 160 kilometres.

² Hësa, sometimes pronounced Hësi, or even Ahsa, is the name for the upper, Kerâhi that for the lower, stretches of the Wâdy. See *EXPOSITOR* for August, 147 f.

³ Except, of course, the Jebel Hauran itself.

⁴ Burckhardt, p. 402: "The climate is extremely agreeable . . . though the heat is very great in summer . . . yet the temperature never becomes suffocating, owing to the refreshing breeze which prevails. . . . The winter is very cold, deep snow falls and the frosts sometimes continue till the middle of March." Irby and Mangles speak of the excessive cold on May 26, "in a latitude more southern than that of the Delta of Egypt" and with a west wind. Palmer, pp. 440-444, describes on the uplands above W. Mûsa snow and hail between April 6 and 10, with 6 inches of snow on the ground and several feet drifting into the tents. Charles Wilson (*P.E.F.Q.*, 1899, 309) styles the climate as colder than that of Palestine, snowstorms not uncommon in winter and spring, the summer hot, but on the plateau the nights always cool. Musil (*Edom*, i. 269) heard that on the east slope of the Jebel esh-Shera', about 11 miles S.W. of Ma'an, at a height of 4,200 feet (1,280 m.) the snow had lain in the winter of 1898

travellers from the west are more frequently conscious of resemblances between the higher landscapes and those of Europe.¹ Again, the main crest or comb of the range does not run here, as in Moab, immediately above the great depression to the west of it, but considerably further east, leaving more room between itself and the 'Arabah for lower ranges and shelves of plateau. But most distinctive of this southern section of the range is the manner in which the underlying rocks obtrude, almost for the first time. None of the basal granite or porphyry comes to the surface along either the Jordan Valley or the Dead Sea; while the Nubian sandstone, which lies immediately above them, appears simply as a narrow ribbon across the lower buttresses of Moab. It is far otherwise with Mount 'Esau. The eastward recession of the upper limestones of the range leaves bare to the west great stretches of the basal rocks. So that, whereas looking east upon Moab you see a high and almost unbroken wall of mountain, all limestone save for its lowest courses of purple sandstone, flashing immediately upon the waters of the Dead Sea, the western aspect of Mount 'Esau is far more graded in form and far more varied in colour. From the lacustrine marls and undulating sand-hills of the 'Arabah, below or at sea-level or even 500 feet above it, rise, in some places to 2,000 feet, rugged masses of red granite and porphyry; and above these a rich red, yellow and white sandstone in successive levels, with steep escarp-

for four days, and in such masses that it was impossible for the Arabs to leave their tents.

¹ Doughty, i. 39: "The limestone moorland, of so great altitude, resembles Europe, and there are hollow park-like grounds with evergreen oak-timber"; Wilson (*P.E.F.Q.*, 1899, 307): "The general aspect of the limestone plateau is not unlike that of the Sussex Downs or the Yorkshire wolds" (this is more true of Edom than of Moab); Musil (*Edom*, i. 37): "Wir ritten über hohes Durrgras an vielen starken Butm-Bäumen und an dichtem Gebüsch vorbei, und es kam mir vor, als wäre ich plötzlich in einen Europäischen Wald versetzt."

ments between them, and varied not only by dykes of the inferior rocks bursting upwards and by a frequent conglomerate of these with itself, but also by occasional limestone strata which the great "fault" has dragged down from above. The depth of this sandstone formation has been estimated at from 1,500 to 2,000 feet. Over and behind it lie the long white and yellow terraces of the limestone, which forms the crest of the range and the great plateau behind it. The volcanic features, apparently secondary as on the rest of the range, are not so numerous; they consist of basalt blocks and ridges both on the main limestone plateau and in some of the valleys.¹ The mineral resources are meagre; in one place there is some copper, and salt is found in several of the gorges.

The variety of Mount 'Esau is thus far greater than that of the range to the north. Besides the high, cool and stony plateaus, which it shares with the latter but lifts to a greater elevation, its western flank forms a series of successive ridges, shelf-lands and strips of valley, with mazes of peaks, cliffs and chasms forming some of the wildest rock-scenery in the world. Especially characteristic of the sandstone above the 'Arabah are the so-called *Siks*: narrow clefts or corridors between lofty perpendicular rocks.

The whole is singularly well watered. Fairly numerous springs emerge between the porous upper strata and the more impervious lower strata of the limestone, and again at the union of the latter with the sandstone. On the limestone

¹ The principal contributions to the geology of the district have been a few notes in Laborde, *Voyage de l'Arabie Pétrée* (1830-3), and Robinson, *Bib. Res.*, ii. (1841); fuller details in John Wilson, *Lands of the Bible* (1843), i. 269 ff., etc; Louis Lartet, *Exploration Géologique de la Mer Morte, de la Palestine et de l'Idumée* (1878, not seen); Palmer, *Desert of the Exodus*, 434, 455, etc.; Edward Hull, *Memoir on The Physical Geology and Geography of Arabia Petraea, Palestine, etc.* (Pal. Expl. Fund, 1888), with geological maps and sections; and Ch. Wilson, *P.E.F.Q.*, 1899, 307 ff. For the volcanic elements see Irby and Mangles, 115, and several other travellers, especially Musil; cf. Buhl, 11 f.

plateau where no springs appear numerous cisterns preserve some of the winter rainfall, just as on other parts of limestone Palestine, while at different periods dams and reservoirs have intercepted the surface waters both in the shallower and deeper wâdies. The wâdies and graded terraces afford ample opportunity for the distribution of these stores of moisture.

So many different levels and soils, thus fairly well watered, naturally produce a varied vegetation. Almost absolutely treeless on its slopes to the desert,¹ the mountain bears on its broad back and broken western flanks plentiful timber.² There are numberless groves, and some extensive and thick woods of the evergreen oak and of the Buṭm or Terebinth;³ and as extensive but more scattered stretches of juniper, a conifer, with a trunk often a foot in diameter, of hard-grained wood that fetches a high price in Kerak and Ma'ân.⁴ The branches of the egriot or cherry-tree are in demand at Damascus and Gaza for pipe-stems.⁵ The poplar and willow are frequent along the Wâdy el-Ḥěsa and are found elsewhere on the limestone.⁶ Below 3,000 feet flourish the flowering laurel, the oleander, and the tamarisk or ṭarfa tree; some travellers report woods of the last named close above the 'Arabah. The sycamore, that does not grow above a level of 1,000 feet over the sea, is infrequent. The nubk or thorn abounds, and the broom or retem. In the wâdies running to the 'Arabah and the Wâdy el-Ḥěsa there are often thick

¹ There are poplars and fruit trees (see below) on the waters at Ma'ân.

² In addition to the separate references given below see for this paragraph especially Chichester Hart, *Some Account of the Fauna and Flora of Sinai, Petra and the W. Arabah*, 1891 (Pal. Expl. Fund).

³ See above: some of the woods are so extensive that it takes an hour and a half to ride through them: Musil, *Edom*, i. 299.

⁴ Arabic Ar'ar, *Juniperus Phœnicea*, Hart, pp. 38, etc.; Musil, *Edom*, i. 37, who gives a second Arabic name for the wood, luzzâb, i.e., "hard" or "firm," and calls it a dark, almost black cypress.

⁵ Arabic Kerâz; Musil, *Edom*, i. 38.

⁶ Buhl, 13, from Doughty.

bush and reeds; for instance, in the Wâdy Ghuweir a jungle of reeds with palms, acacias, tamarisks and thorn-trees. The honeysuckle, the caper and other trailers are found, and a species of flowering aloe is reported in Wâdy Mûsa.¹

The fruit-trees, to which so great a range of levels is hospitable, are also many. On the limestone the olive, fig and vine flourish as in Palestine with the less frequent pomegranate, also the carob and the mulberry. Most of these are found too on the western sandstones but with less fertility.² Even of the far eastern Ma'ân Doughty reports that the "boughs of her fruit-trees hang over the clay orchard-walls into the inhuman desert."³ Dried acorns are gathered for food, the berries of the terebinth are also eaten, and the black fruit of the juniper manufactured into a sweetmeat.⁴

On the high plateau and elsewhere the winter rains bring up great stretches of a long, thick grass, which is still green in the end of May, but by July and August is withered and hard.⁵ Pasture for sheep, for goats and for oxen is therefore fairly abundant—"the greatest sheep-flocks which I have seen of the Arabs were in the rocky coomb-land between Shobek and Petra"⁶—and even on the hardest slopes of the mountain and out upon the desert there is always

¹ By Irby and Mangles under May 24; not seen by Hart (p. 39) but confirmed, *minus* the flowers, by Dalman, p. 25.

² I have heard Arabs say that the olives of Edom are not to be compared with those of Judaea. Dalman in reporting the poorness of the olives seems to refer only to a sandstone district (*Petra*, p. 1). Idrisi, 5, says that "the districts esh-Shara' and el-Jebâl are very fertile, producing quantities of olive-trees, almonds," etc. Strabo's statement (XVI. iv. 21) about the Nabatean country that "it produces everything except oil of olives; the oil of sesamum is used"—must be received with caution. It may refer not to Edom but to Arabia Felix.

³ *Arabia Deserta*, i. 33.

⁴ Musil, *Edom*, i. 37 f.

⁵ Doughty, i. 37: "Green is this upland in the ending of May . . . with wild grassy herbage"; Musil, *passim*: "high Durrgras" in August and September.

⁶ Doughty, i. 39.

fodder for camels. Wherever soil lies, barley and wheat may be sown. Even the high stony back of the range is arable, as are many of the hillsides ; “ in the best sheltered plains are corn-plots, 'ard-ba'al, nourished only by rain.”¹ But the richest fields are the higher, shallow wâdies, the wider portions of the deep wâdies, and numerous basins watered by rivulets from the springs or by artificial channels. It is wonderful how rock-cut conduits have rendered fertile at one time or another unpromising shelf-lands on the western slope. The same sources make possible, nearly everywhere in the valleys, gardens of lentils, onions, garlic and other vegetables.

This agriculture was variously exposed to the wilder countries about it. Except when a strong authority ruled the land from Petra or some other centre, with influence along the desert roads east and west, or when the Roman frontier ran down the eastern border, the plateau and its slopes to the desert lay open to the nomad swarms of Arabia and the peasantry could pursue their cultivation, as many of them do to-day, only by blackmail to the Arabs. To this state of life the numerous ruins of watch-towers testify, especially by the principal cisterns on the limestone plateau. All travellers notice how the springs have at one time or another been guarded by little forts or block-houses. The whole of the range is crossed annually by Bedawee tribes migrating between their winter resorts in the 'Arabah and their spring or early-summer pastures east of the Hajj road.² When under the control of a secure government these nomads would be welcomed by the fellâhin for the sake of the trade they engendered and the money they paid for stubble and water for their flocks ;³ but in times of disorder they must

¹ Ibid. Musil (*Edom*, ii. 239) contrasts the fertility of the main range with the barrenness of its eastern spurs.

² Musil, *Edom*, ii. 15.

³ Cf. Numbers xx. 19.

have rendered much of the cultivation precarious and unprofitable.¹ Nevertheless the narrowness of the western defiles and the enclosure of many of the most fertile basins by precipitous or easily defended ridges of rock have secured in certain localities the persistence of a settled population and of agriculture down through all kinds of political conditions to the present day. It was, therefore, not only under a strong Edomite state, but in part also at all other periods, that the description of the Hebrew prophet remained true: *Dweller in the clefts of the rock, the height is his habitation: that saith in his heart, Who shall bring me down to earth?*

Mount 'Esau is, thus, a well-watered, richly stocked and variously accessible country, whose self-sufficiency under a strong government is attested no less by the ruins which imply a large ancient population with a vigorous and profitable agriculture than by the secure and arrogant temper imputed to them by their neighbours of Israel. They must have had some surplus of several kinds for their trade with Arabia, Egypt and Syria; especially timber, oil, copper and cattle. But it is singular that, with the possible exception of cattle and the certain exceptions of aromatic and medicinal herbs and of the vegetable alkali, we do not learn from either Jewish or Greek writers of any Edomite exports.² Even if in Ezekiel's list of the customers of

¹ Obadiah 3; cf. Jeremiah xlix. 16.

² The exception is suggested by Isaiah lx. 7: *the rams of Nebaiôth*, and the statement of Eupolemus (*Fragm. Histor. Graec.*, iii. 226) of the importation of cattle to Judah from Arabia. But in neither case is the reference to Edom more than possible. See, however, Strabo XVI. iv. 18: "*Nabataea*, a country well peopled and abounding in cattle"; 26: "The sheep have white fleeces, their oxen are large, but the country produces no horses. Camels are used instead." Pliny (xxi. 72) says that "the most esteemed kind of the sweet-scented rush is that which grows in Nabatea with the name *teuchites*," and he explains its medicinal properties. If this be the Lemon-grass (*Andropogon Schoenanthus*), it is found in Arabia; cf. Jerem. vi. 20: *incense from Sheba and sweet cane from a far country*; Isa. xliii. 24, Exod. xxx. 23. Burckhardt (p. 411) reports that the Arabs

Tyre we ought to read with some versions *Edom* instead of *Aram*, the context gives us no information on the point.¹ The sources of the bitumen which the Nabatean possessors of Mount 'Esau exported to the Greek world lay, of course, outside the territory of Edom proper.

The treasures of 'Esau, and the wealth generally attributed to their successors the Nabateans, were rather due to their command of the transit trade from Arabia and the Gulf of 'Aḳabah to the Levant and Palestine as described in the previous article. Amos implies that they were slave-traders.²

2. THE PRINCIPAL DIVISIONS.

We have seen that Mount 'Esau, unlike the rest of the range to the north, is cut by no wâdies draining right through it from the Desert. Yet while this is so the mountain is crossed by other less marked lines of structure which appear to have parted it at all times, as certainly to-day, into different divisions under distinctive names. First of all about 30 miles (48 kilometres) south of the Wâdy el-Hësa the range which has risen to a tableland of about 4,900 feet (1,500 m.) and even to a summit of 5,280 feet (1,640 m.),³ is cleft, north-west south-east, from the 'Arabah almost to the watershed by the broad and profound Wâdy el-Ghuweir; and, a little south from the sources of this but just across the watershed (which is somewhat lower here than either to the north or to the south), starts the long Wâdy abul-Hammâm running south-east into the Desert. This diagonal line, near the centre of which stands the fortress of Shôbak, forms the

gather Kali in the mountains of esh-Shera' and "go to Gaza to sell the soap-ashes."

¹ Ezek. xxvii. 16, for the Massoretic עֲרָם, 6 Hebr. MSS., Aquila and the Peshitto read עֲרָם, while the LXX read at least the consonants עֲרָם.

² Amos i. 9; cf. Obadiah 14.

³ These are Musil's figures.

boundary between two districts known respectively as el-Jebâl to the north and esh-Shera' to the south. Sir Charles Wilson describes the natural division as "the Shobek gap."¹ Herr Musil gives the political frontier as the Wâdy abu-l-Hammâm. More exactly Dr. Dalman reports the latter to be the shallow sidd Daḥdil which runs into the top of the Wâdy el-Ghuweir, and separates the kada or administrative district of et-Tafîleh, deriving its name from the chief town of el-Jebâl, from the kada of Ma'ân, the chief town of esh-Shera'.²

The name el-Jebâl is sometimes given by the fellâhîn as an equivalent for et-Tafîleh, the chief town of the section and its suburbs ;³ but its proper application is to the whole district. The name is no recent one. It occurs in a Hebrew Psalm as Gēbâl,⁴ in association with such other general terms as Edom, Moab and Ammon. Both by the Samaritan version of the Pentateuch,⁵ and by the Jerusalem Targum⁶ it is used to render the Hebrew Se'îr. In the Talmud it appears to be applied both to the district and to a town.⁷ Josephus gives the Greek form Gobolitis as the name of part of Idumaea ;⁸ and mentions the Gebalitai along with the Amalekites and Edomites as the object of Amaziah's expedition.⁹ Eusebius and Jerome give Gebalēnē as equivalent to Idumaea.¹⁰ Two things are significant about this name, its origin and its meaning. Jebâl is an Arabic word, the plural of Jebel, and means "mountains." Consequently

¹ *P.E.F.Q.*, 1899, 320.

² *Z.D.P.V.*, xxxi. 265 f.

³ Musil, i. 316 : there is also a seyl (stream) el-Jebâl, Id. 317 and map.

⁴ Psalm lxxxiii. 8.

⁵ E.g., Deut. xxxiii. 2.

⁶ E.g., on Genesis xxxii. 4 ; 1 Chron. i. 38.

⁷ *Talmud Bab.* "Ketubôth," cited by Neubauer, *Géog. de Talmud*, 67 ;

"Abod. sara," 59a.

⁸ ii. *Ant.* i. 2 ; iii. *Ant.* ii. 1 : in the latter passage along with Petra.

⁹ ix. *Ant.* ix. 1.

¹⁰ *Onom. sacr. sub voce Fēbed*, and elsewhere ; they also use the form Gebalitica.

it does not appear in Hebrew literature till after the exile, when the Edomites had been driven from Mount 'Esau by their Arabian successors. Again the name is not distinctive of the section to which it is applied, when this is seen from the west; for *the whole* of Mount 'Esau appears from this direction to be broken up into "mountains." But if we approach the range from Arabia, the southern section of the Mount, *esh-Shera'*, presents itself as one continuous declivity; while *el-Jebâl* is a ridge dominated by high black summits, and running out into several¹ other ridges.¹ The appropriateness of the name on the Arabian side is therefore obvious.

The name *esh-Shera'* has nothing to do with *Sē'ir*, as has been sometimes supposed. It may be connected with the Arabic root *shara'*, to lie exposed to the air and the sun, so as to become dry. Dr. Dalman has suggested that the name appears in that of the Nabatean deity, the chief god of Petra, *Du-shara'*, equivalent to *He of Shara'*.²

The Arab geographers seem sometimes to have combined the name with that of its neighbour to the north *Jebâl esh-Shera'*, as if one province; and at other times to have extended the name *Shera'* alone over the whole of Mount of 'Esau, with *Zughar*, or *Zo'ar*, at the south end of the Dead Sea as its capital. But again they sometimes more correctly confine it to the southern part of Mount 'Esau, with *Odhruh* as its capital.³

From the northern beginning of *esh-Shera'*, properly the *Jebel el-Hîsheh*, the range rises south and mainly on two parallel ridges,¹ one of which reaches a summit of 5,412 feet (1,650 metres) and then declines somewhat till it sinks in the *Gebel el-Hāfir* (or *Kāfir*) to the plain *Kedriyyât*.

¹ Musil, i. 2; ii. 14.

² *Petra*, p. 49.

³ Le Strange, *Palestine under the Moslems*, pp. 32, 24, etc.

Here the division esh-Shera' finds its southern frontier: a genuine geographical limit, for here the upper limestone formations of the range come to an end, all to the south is sandstone, and the mountains run, according to Musil, no longer north and south, but east and west.¹

This region forms the next distinctive division of our territory and is known as el-Hisma or Hesma, the formation and the name stretching far eastward into Arabia. El-Hisma consists of a high sandstone plateau with numerous truncated cones, and, upon the west, of bare hills in two grades; according to Doughty, "a forest of square-built platform mountains which rise to two thousand feet above the plain, the heads may be nearly six thousand feet [about 1,800 metres] above sea level."² Burckhardt says that "Hesma is higher than any part of Schera"³; on Musil's map no figures are given for the altitude of el-Hisma. On the south it falls upon the granite formations round the Gulf of 'Akaba.

The only other definite divisions that it is necessary to mention are Iram, "a black mountain landscape,"⁴ south-east of the plateau of el-Hisma; and el-Jafar, a swampy district east of esh-Shera', into which all the eastern waters of the latter flow and die out.

The next article will treat the detailed topography, towns, etc.

GEORGE ADAM SMITH.

¹ The above data are derived from Burckhardt (pp. 435 ff.). Doughty (i. 45, etc.), and Musil (*Edom*, i. pp. 2, 265, 270, etc.), who gives the most distinct details. It is he who contributes the datum of 1650 m. Brünnow's highest figure is 1615 m. (*Die Provincia Arabia*, vol. i.; while Blanckenhorn contributes one as high as 1709 m. (*Die Hedschaz-Bahn*, 57).

² Doughty, i. 46.

³ Burckhardt, 729.

⁴ Musil, i. 4.