

ON THE SITE OF AI AND THE POSITION OF THE
ALTAR WHICH ABRAM BUILT BETWEEN BETHEL
AND AI.

BY CAPTAIN CHARLES W. WILSON, R.E.

IN the spring of 1866 several days were spent by Lieutenant Anderson and myself in examining the mountain district east of Beitin (Bethel), with the view of fixing, if possible, the site of Ai, and the position of the mountain on which Abram pitched his tent and built his second altar to Jehovah after entering the Promised Land. The examination consisted in personally visiting every hill-top and almost every acre of ground for several miles, east, north, and south of Bethel, and the result was most satisfactory, for we were able with great certainty to identify Ai with Et-Tel, and the mountain of the altar with a prominent hill between Et-Tel and Beitin. Several previous travellers appear to have identified Ai with the quasi-isolated hill of Et-Tel, but their descriptions of it are vague and unsatisfactory, its position is constantly changing on their maps, and it appears as Tel el-Hajar, "the heap of stones," Tel er-Rijmeh, "the heap of ruins," names which were probably given by the Arabs in answer to the question "What Tel?" when the traveller was not satisfied with the first simple answer that he received—that it was Et-Tel, "the heap." After close questioning we could never obtain any other name than that of Et-Tel, and it was with great pleasure that, after our return to England, I learnt from the Rev. G. Williams that in the original text of Joshua viii. 28, Joshua is said to have "burnt Ai and made it a Tel for ever," and that the word "Tel" only occurs in four other passages of the Bible, among which are Deut. xiii. 16, and Josh. xi. 13. Mr. Williams's identification of Ai with Et-Tel, which I was not aware of at the time, was described by him in a paper read before the Church Congress at Dublin in 1868.

The topography of Ai is as minutely described as that of any other place in the Bible; it lay to the east of Bethel, it had a valley on the north, and another on the west, in which the five thousand men were placed in ambush; it also had a plain in front of, or on the east side of it, over which the Israelites were pursued by the men of Ai. (See Joshua vii. 2, and viii. 11—14.) These features are all found in connection with Et-Tel, and with no other place in the neighbourhood of Bethel. The ground which at first breaks down rapidly from the great ridge that forms the backbone of Palestine, swells out into a small plain three-quarters of a mile broad before commencing its abrupt descent to the Jordan valley, and at the head or western end of this plain, on a projecting spur which has almost the appearance of an isolated hill, are the ruins known as Et-Tel. A short distance west of the mound, and entirely concealed from it by rising ground, is a small ravine well suited for an ambush, one of the branches of the main valley which runs close to Et-Tel and protects its northern face, the same into which the army of the

Israelites descended the night before the capture of the city. On the hills to the north beyond the valley, Joshua encamped before making his final arrangements for the attack (viii. 11, 12), and it seems probable that he took his stand at some point on the same hill-side whilst the battle was raging, for there is a most commanding view over the whole scene, not only up the lateral valley in which the ambush was placed, but also down the way of the wilderness. He would thus be able at the same time to control the feigned flight of the Israelites, and signal the ambush to rise up quickly and seize the city. The site of Ai is now covered from head to foot with heaps of stones and ruins; there are a large number of rock-hewn cisterns and the remains of ancient terraces, some of which are cultivated by the fellahin of the neighbouring villages. On the top of the hill is a small circular space with a few olive-trees, which are blown on one side by the westerly gales like the well-known "Judas tree" at Jerusalem, and form a prominent object in the landscape for miles round, as the towers of Ai may have done before Joshua made them a Tel for ever. It may be mentioned here that there is no practicable road up the beds of the wadies from Jericho to Bethel. The present track crosses the plain mentioned above as lying below Et-Tel; and the old road, the ascent by which Elisha "went up" to Bethel, must have followed the same course. Ai lying thus between the ravine on the north and the gorge on which Michmash stands (the "passage" of Isaiah x. 29) on the south, would lie directly in the way of an army advancing from the Jordan Valley to the interior of Palestine.

Having fixed the site of Ai, our next object was to find the hill on which Abram and Lot were encamped before their separation. The place is described in Genesis xii. 8, as "a mountain on the east of Bethel, having Bethel on the west, and Ai on the east," and exactly in this position we found a hill from which there is a most commanding view, such as might be expected from Genesis xiii. 10, over the surrounding country, embracing the lower portion of the Jordan Valley, the plain of Jericho, and the northern extremity of the Dead Sea.

On the top of the hill we noticed the ruins, or rather foundations, of an old fortified church, which are mentioned by one or two writers only. The church is 65ft. 6in. long by 48ft. 6in. broad, and lies in an enclosure 133ft. long by 73ft. broad, round the walls of which can be traced the foundations of cells or chambers. Some fragments of Corinthian capitals and the broken shafts of several columns were lying in the interior.

The presence of a church in such a position, with such a view from it, and with traces of an old road leading from it towards Bethel, was so striking that we could hardly resist coming at once to the conclusion that the site of Abram's altar was perfectly well known to the early Christians—as Ai was certainly known to them by name down to the fourth century—and that the church was purposely built on the spot in commemoration of the events which had taken place there.

If we are right in identifying this hill with the mountain of Genesis xii. 8, there is one question on which considerable light will be thrown,

the site of the cities of the plain. It is hardly possible, I think, for any one to read the account in Genesis xiii. 10, without feeling that Abram and Lot were actually looking down on Sodom and Gomorrah when "Lot lifted up his eyes, and beheld all the plain of Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere, before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah," &c. If this be the case, then the view from the hill fixes their position to have been on the plain at the northern end of the Dead Sea, not under the hills near Jericho, but out in mid-plain, possibly not far from the now barren tract which most travellers skirt on their way from the Dead Sea to the Jordan. That the greater portion of this tract was at one time cultivated, "well watered everywhere, even as a garden of the Lord," there is ample evidence in the numerous traces of former irrigation to be found on a careful examination of the ground. In support of this view may be cited the mention of the plain of Jordan in verse 10, which could not have extended below the point at which the river entered the Dead Sea, and the direct testimony in verse 11 that Lot journeyed east, a course which would lead him far away from the southern end of the Dead Sea where writers from Josephus to the present day have placed the cities of the plain. The only argument which appears to be unfavourable to the above theory is that Abram would not have been able to see the smoke of the country going up like the smoke of a furnace from any point near his camp at Mamre. This would perhaps be true if his tent was pitched under "Abraham's Oak," in the valley near Hebron, but not if it was at Râmet el-Khalil, where old tradition placed it, and where there are still the remains of Constantine's Church. The wording is also different in the two passages: in one case, Lot beholds the plain; in the other, Abraham looks toward all the land of the plain and sees the smoke of the doomed cities rising up into the sky; and it may be added that he could not have seen more if the cities had been at the southern end of the lake, for it is not visible either from the neighbourhood of Hebron or Râmet el-Khalil.*

I would here refer those who wish to examine for themselves the question of the site of Sodom and Gomorrah to the exhaustive article on Sodom in Smith's "Dictionary of the Bible," by Mr. Grove, who was, I believe, the first to advocate the northern position of the "cities of the plain."

It is not intended in the present notice to discuss the nature of the catastrophe by which the cities perished, but it cannot be too often mentioned that there is no ground for the popular belief that the cities lie beneath the waters of the Dead Sea. It is distinctly stated in the Bible that fire was the agent of destruction; and Monsieur Lartet, in his able paper on the "Geology of the Dead Sea," has clearly shown that the country must have assumed its present form long before the advent of man upon the earth, and that the water of the lake at one time extended far up the Jordan Valley, gradually falling till it reached its present level, and the evaporation and supply were equalised.

* The traditional place where Abram is said to have stood before Jehovah is Beni Naim, about five miles east of Hebron.

A few words may here be said on the ruins in the neighbourhood of Beitin; the first, a prominent object from the village, is the Burj or Castle of Beitin; this was once a fortified church, the church lying within a square enclosure, round the sides of which were chambers similar to those attached to the church erected by Justinian on Mount Gerizim. Many fragments of columns, capitals, lintels, &c., are built into the walls of the modern tower and of the vineyards round it. To the north-east of Beitin are some extensive ruins called Deir Shebba* or Shebat, covering a large amount of ground on both sides of one of the ravines falling to the Jordan: they consist of foundations of roughly-dressed stones, and in one place of some shafts of columns. The name may be connected with that of Sheikh Sheban, whose tomb is shown on the side of the wady on which Beitin stands. Some distance below the village, and lower down the same valley, westward from Michmah and not far from Et-Tel (Ai), are some ruins called Khurbet An, possibly the site of Beth-aven, which must have been somewhere in the vicinity. At Beitin itself there are no ruins of consequence exposed to view, but the village stands on heaps of rubbish which may conceal interesting relics of the time when the golden calf was worshipped at Bethel. In the valley close by are the rock-hewn tombs out of which Josiah took the bones which he burned on the altar, "according to the word of the Lord which the man of God proclaimed;" but we could find no trace of that title which once marked the resting-place of the disobedient prophet. From the hill above Beitin the traveller going north catches his last view of Jerusalem, and it is curious to think that if the Temple stood there, as it may well have done, the kings of Israel, when they went up to worship the golden calf at Bethel, must often have seen the walls and porches of Solomon's Temple glittering in the bright sunlight.

C. W. WILSON.

December 12, 1869.

RESULTS OF METEOROLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS TAKEN AT BEYROUT, SYRIA, FROM THE YEAR 1845 TO 1854.

BY JAMES GLAISHER, F.R.S., ETC., FROM OBSERVATIONS BY HENRY HEALD, ESQ., AS FURNISHED BY G. JACKSON ELDRIDGE, ESQ., H.B.M.'S CONSUL-GENERAL IN SYRIA.

FROM the year 1845 to the year 1854, meteorological observations were taken at Beyrout, by Henry Heald, Esq., and from the registers the observations have been made regularly and carefully kept. From them Mr. Jackson Eldridge, our consul-general in Syria, has extracted the monthly mean temperature at the times of observation, viz. :—8.30 A.M., Noon, and 6 P.M., together with the maximum and minimum reading as found at the times of reading, in every month, and all the observations

* Can this be a trace of the name Shebarim, mentioned in connexion with Ai in Josh. vii. 5? [G.]