

ART. VI.—THE PASSAGE OF JORDAN.

JOSHUA III. AND IV.

IN order to grasp thoroughly the details of this remarkable occurrence, it is necessary that we should have a succinct knowledge of the physical features of the Jordan and its valley, so as to be able to reconcile the apparently perplexing statements of the record with absolute facts.

The river Jordan is described to us by explorers as one that has never been navigable except by an occasional ferry-boat across its stream. It is one of the swiftest rivers in the world, as its gradient is a remarkably steep one. In the short space of its course between the Sea of Tiberias and the Dead Sea no less than twenty-seven rapids have been enumerated, and it is somewhere in a very limited part of the lower half of this course, opposite Jericho, that the scene of the passage is laid by the Scriptural record. Its valley varies in width, from seven miles north of the latitude of Jericho to about twelve miles between that point and the Dead Sea, though the greatest breadth of its perennial stream appears to be never more than about a hundred yards. It is impossible to gauge its depth with any attempt to draw an average, as it is so extremely diversified, and in no part of its course can its bed be described as uniform, the nearest approach to this being close to where its flow ends in the Dead Sea.

Under these conditions we should expect to find the floor of the Jordan's permanent channel where the passage took place, opposite Jericho, to be very rough and uneven; and if by any means we were enabled to witness a *cutting off* of its waters, such as was brought about for the Israelites' passage, we are forced to the conclusion that we should see innumerable holes, pools, scours, etc., where water would still remain, though the whole flow had drained off, and, correspondingly, huge boulders, rocks, banks, and ridges coming between them. The definition also of a ford (and there were many in Jordan) being *a causeway across a river, affording more or less easy passage to waders, and on either side of which deeper water necessarily exists*, it stands to reason that if the actual flow of water were altogether stopped the causeway of a ford would of itself present a barrier to the drainage of the deeper water above it, which would remain, albeit without current. And though many changes must have taken place in the actual bed and valley since this event, we can scarcely doubt that the main features of its course are much the same now as they were then; and we actually know that the river is

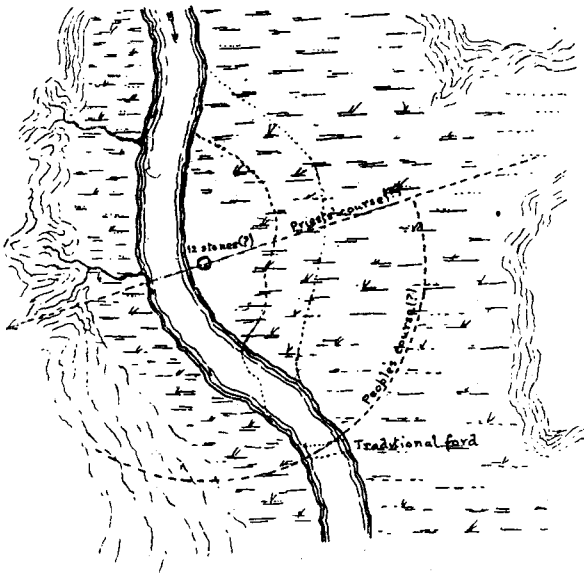
still subject to annual overflow at the same season, or time of harvest.

Let us now consider what the difficulties of the narrative are, for it is quite possible we may not have as yet seriously studied them. On reading chap. iii. we are at once confronted with the fact, in verse 4, that, though the waters were *cut off* for the Israelites, their passage across the river was by no means the simple one we might at first sight imagine it to have been. It distinctly brings before us an element of danger which was to be avoided, and for this purpose we are told that an interval of 2,000 cubits (about three-quarters of a British mile) from a fixed point—the spot where the priests halted with the ark—was prescribed to them to find the only way by which they could cross the river. And here we are shown that there were two lines of passage—viz., that taken by the priests and that taken by the people—for if the people followed the priests with the ark, and maintained the prescribed interval of 2,000 cubits between themselves and it, arriving on the other bank while it was halting in the midst of the river, the conclusion is obvious that the respective courses were not the same, but must have been different. And when we consider carefully what these two separate courses were, we discover that the problem enunciated in verse 4 of the record admits of no alternative in the construction of the figure to be drawn from it, which is practically—not taking the precise locality into consideration, of course—as shown in the accompanying diagram.

Let us now see what we can learn from this figure. Chapter iii., verse 8, which next engages our attention, tells us that the priests with the ark were commanded to halt at the “brink” of Jordan, and yet we find that they halted in the “midst” of it (iii. 17, and iv. 3, 5, 8-10, 18). There was only one halting-place, and it was round this one point that the people were to be careful to wheel, in order to “know the way.” Is, therefore, the term “brink” an unfortunate slip on the part of the narrator, or is it quite intentional in its correctness? If it is correct, as we believe to be the case, then both “brink” and “midst,” though such widely different terms, must have been used to denote one and the same spot, and that this is actually so the only figure (that shown above) which the text warrants us in drawing of the lines of passage puts us in a position to prove. All that we know of the state of the Jordan at this time is that it was in flood—that it had overflowed its banks at the usual season of harvest (iii. 15). The “brink” of Jordan’s permanent channel was not, therefore, the “brink”

("brim," A.V.) of the overflow water. We are not theorizing merely, but are putting forward plain statements founded on the facts narrated. The priests were not left to their own judgment of the point they were to halt at in a sea of waters—for the waters had not begun to fail when the command was given them—but they were directed to proceed to a point which was called the "brink" of Jordan, but which afterwards is called the "midst" of Jordan, and to halt there. It is very clear, therefore, that there must have been a portion

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of the bank of the permanent channel which the flood had not submerged, and which was indicated to them before they started from camp. This unsubmerged piece of ground will be seen in the lower section of the above diagram illustrating the various water levels. We may infer also that at the time they reached the spot pointed out to them they could not have gone farther if they had tried to do so. It is not difficult to picture this knoll, or high unsubmerged bank, on the "brink" of Jordan's permanent channel, appearing above the surrounding waters, midway between the shallow overflow water on one side and the channel of perennial Jordan with its opposite overflow water on the other. The scene must be a familiar one to many of our readers, and it was precisely

this scene that was presented to the eyes of the priests when they received their orders to go on and halt at that spot on the "brink" of Jordan. This knoll, which must subsequently have assumed the appearance of a headland to the alluvial vicinity as the water drained off, was therefore situated within or in the midst of the waters of Jordan during its overflow, and it requires no stretch of ingenuity or imagination to see how both the terms "brink" and "midst" are indicative of one and the same spot. And, wonderful to relate, the connection of the concluding parenthesis of verse 15 ("for Jordan overfloweth all his banks all the time of harvest") with what precedes it, a connection inexplicable before the reconciliation of the two terms "brink" and "midst," is now clearly revealed to us. For the word "brink" ("brim," A.V.) in this verse, though its individual meaning is exactly the same, must not be mistaken for the same place as the "brink" in verse 8. This first "brink" or "brim" was the margin of the overflow water through which the priests had to pass as it was draining off before they reached the second "brink" of the channel of permanent Jordan. And verse 8 also does not leave us without definite assistance in the elucidation, for it describes that "brink" as being "in Jordan," a qualification which the overflow "brink" or "brim" could not possibly convey, and which almost of itself proves that "midst" and "brink" are used of the same place. And does not this revelation justify us also in realizing the truth of the narrator's record—undesigned as it appears to be—where he says (iv. 9) that the memorial stones set up in the midst of Jordan where the priests halted were still in position when he wrote the record? At any rate, we can more clearly realize how they could have been seen by him if reared on ground not liable to flood, than if they had been set up in the midst of a rapid river's dried-up bed, so as to have been not only uncovered—ay, though they were as large as Stonehenge—but also to have survived the ordinary, much less the overflow, volume of Jordan's water.

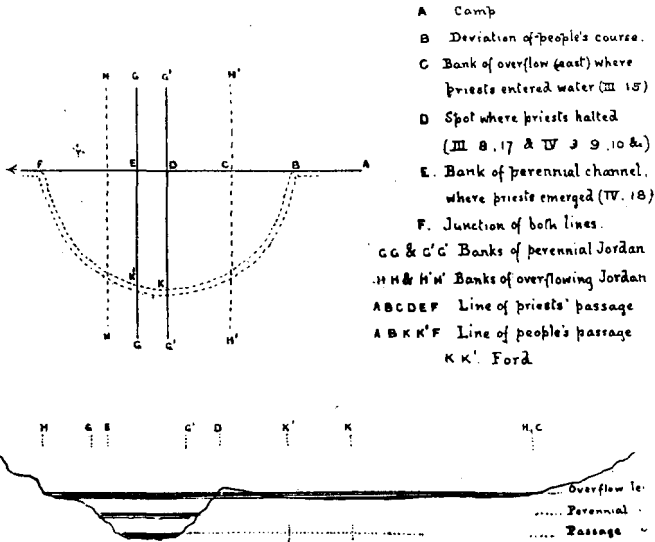
But we have not yet applied all the text to the figure we have drawn. If we may be allowed to paraphrase the warning given in verse 4 (iii.), it would run thus: Come not nearer to the ark than three-quarters of a mile, in order that you may be able to strike the only way by which you can go. And now we must take much more pains over the concluding sentence, as it is capable of three perfectly legitimate interpretations: (a) The first and all too obvious one—you have never been this way before; (b) the meaning—because in all your desert wanderings you have never passed this *kind of way* before; (c) the meaning—because you have had no oppor-

tunity of testing this way during the three days that you have been in its vicinity. We submit that this last rendering is allowed us if we make use of the alternate version, given in the margin, of the word "heretofore." And although we are aware that the phrase "since yesterday and the third day" may be merely a Hebrew equivalent for "heretofore," in the same way that the Homeric expression *χθιζά τε καὶ πρόιζα* is similarly used, yet it must be acknowledged that it is here most felicitous and appropriate. For the Israelites had been actually three days encamped in the vicinity of the river, and yet knew of no way of crossing it, as it had been, and was now, in flood. Now, if it had not been in flood, the priests would not have had to dip their feet in the overflow water (iii. 15) before reaching their indicated halting-station; and the people would not have been unaware of the existence of a ford, the only way of crossing a river where there is neither bridge nor ferry. Otherwise the concluding sentence of the verse (iii. 4) is so obvious as to appear superfluous if we do not attach to it the sense of which the whole verse is so suggestive, and which it invites us to take. There must, therefore, have been a ford, which was useless during flood, but which was really the only way they could go; and it is significant that local tradition should also point to the modern ford of *el Mashra'a* ("Bible Dictionary") as the scene of the Israelites' passage. When we reflect that many, if not most, of the fellahen tribes of Palestine are of Canaanite descent, we must pause before we reject such local traditions, and we know that many of them indicating Old Testament localities are being proved to be substantially correct. But there is still more to be learned from our figure of the passage. It illustrates very forcibly, to all who have experience of such matters, a general and practical rule as to how a ford is to be found—viz., below the junction of a river's permanent channel with one of its own shallower or dry channels; and this leads us to the conviction that the semicircular course taken by the people enabled them to strike "the way" (ford) by which they had to go (iii. 4). Owing to their composition, they could not have proceeded along the same way as the priests went, and as the priests had to halt at the brink of Jordan, so would these have had to wait there till the water of the perennial current had drained off sufficiently, and even then it appears to us very doubtful if women and children could have crossed there *in haste* (iv. 10). We are not told of the period of time taken to cross, except so far as that they reached their encampment at Gilgal the same day; but that there was no time to be wasted is evident from the verse cited above. The economizing of time in the line taken by the

people appears, therefore, to have been part of the Divine plan, for we read (iii. 15, 16) that when the priests' feet were dipped in the overflow margin, that instant the waters began to drain off, or "failed." By the time they had reached the higher ground on the actual brink of Jordan, the shallow channel they had crossed was obviously the first to have been drained dry, though that before them was still deep. The differently constituted individuals composing the people following had need of the now dry overflow bed to enable them to exercise the maximum amount of speed along the devious course leading to the ford, which also may have become *quasi* dry by the time they reached it; though we are inclined to think there must have been some water still on it, albeit not inconvenient, on which their prescribed radius from the ark made it still necessary for them to keep to. Their safe transit across, however, was the signal for the priests to cross over—not by the same ford, but through the water of the permanent channel before them, which now sufficiently admitted of their passage; for that they went through water finally is evident (iv. 18). Then, as their feet were lifted out of the water on to the steeper bank before them, the water began to rush into its usual channel, and Jordan gradually overflowed its banks as before. When we couple the fact that the people were to be careful to preserve their prescribed distance as an index to the one way by which they could go with the fact that they had to use haste in their passage, we cannot conceive a more perfect design to economize the time than that exhibited during the period of the drainage of the water on both the lines of passage. But, it may be asked, why should the *failing* of the water before the Israelites be interpreted as a process of drainage? This brings us to a study of verse 16 (iii.), in which a graphic description is given of what took place; and if this description of what occurred were given us at the present day of any modern river, we should, without hesitation, attribute it to but one natural cause, that of a landslip; and we are in thorough agreement with those who have advocated this means employed by the Almighty as the cause of the failing of the waters of Jordan (see also CHURCHMAN magazine for October, 1903, "Miracles of Joshua under the Light of Modern Discoveries"). And, personally, we can offer our own testimony of similar occurrences in India being occasioned by the very same means. Let no one imagine that this natural means employed detracts from the greatness of the miracle, the notable feature of which was that it was designed to be coincident with the passage, where the details were so arranged

that they should not take longer to perform than the limit set to the permanence of the obstructive cause.

But before the priests left their station, twelve stalwart men, each no doubt picked as a peculiarly suitable representative of his tribe, were ordered to cross to where the priests stood, and fetch thence on their shoulders twelve stones to be carried to Gilgal, as a lasting memorial of the passage. It is interesting to note where the station in the column of this chosen band could have been. In verse 12 (iii.) they are merely mentioned as to be selected, without any duty being assigned to them, and it is only in the next chapter that



we hear of their being made use of. But the location of this verse between the 11th and 13th is very significant of the office for which they seem to have been chosen. Their position appears to have been at the head of the people's column, where they probably acted as pioneers and markers to the host of Israel, and were thus in readiness at the same place on the other side to carry out their duty there. The priests meanwhile had not been idle, for it was they, perhaps, who reared the second set of twelve stones where they stood, under Joshua's directions, which was the set reported to be still standing when the narrative was written.

It is quite possible—nay, even unquestionable—that the course of the river has undergone many stupendous changes since this memorable event. High banks have, no doubt, suffered detrition and wholesale demolition; overflow channels

have silted up as to be rendered no longer subject to inundation, or may have become perennial channels as others have been obstructed. But, making allowance for all changes, it will be admitted that a stony eminence, bank, or island would not be so liable to wear as ground where there is little or no stone. There were stones on the very spot where the priests stood, and this might be some indication of the permanence of the spot ; so that, if it so happened that all the natural conditions accompanying the passage were discovered to be more or less present in or near the modern ford of el Mashra'a, the probability is that the limit of a radius of about three-quarters of a mile would sweep over the very spot where the priests stood with the ark. And it may possibly also be some indication to explorers not to expect to find any traces of these stones in the bed of the river, but on some higher ground not liable to inundation.

It would perhaps be interesting to readers to know that there is an island in the Jordan just above the traditional *ford of the passage*, though it seems that now the perennial channel is immediately on the east, and the overflow channel on the west of it. But these may have, of course, altered. Assuming the channels to have been as shown on our first diagram, that here presented will illustrate how they could be applied to the modern traditional ford.

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ART. VII.—ST. PAUL'S SIGNATURE.

THE following brief notes are an attempt to trace the evolution of the familiar prayer, "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ," and the use of the phrase by St. Paul as his signature. The study is one of intense interest, and might be carried a good deal further, especially if any light could be thrown from ancient inscriptions on the method of writing the phrase. Up to the present time the facsimiles of the three great uncials—the Vatican, the Sinaitic, and the Alexandrine—in the British Museum are the only ancient methods of writing the phrase which the writer has been able to examine. Should any student who is more fortunately situated with regard to inscriptions be able to throw further light on this subject, it may help in building an additional line of defence for the genuineness of the two Thessalonian Epistles.