

“DOWN FROM JERUSALEM TO JERICHO”

by ERIC F. F. BISHOP

MR. BISHOP'S gift for illustrating the biblical narrative from his long and loving acquaintance with the land and the people of Palestine is by now well known to many of our readers. In recent years he has published much of this lore in his books "Jesus of Palestine", "Apostles of Palestine" and (most recently) "Prophets of Palestine". Here he concentrates on one small portion of the Land, and uses it effectively in his own inimitable way to illustrate the Book.

JERUSALEM, it seems, was always a crossroads. The tribes from time immemorial have had to "go up". Though perched not quite on the summit of a plateau 2,700 feet above sea level, this Holy Mountain, "beautiful in elevation", has refused to be avoided.¹ Travellers and merchants yet have to go up to go down, unless perhaps like the Good Samaritan they meet the road half way to Jericho. Bethlehem and Hebron are both higher than Jerusalem. The pilgrim too from the north looks down on the Holy City, once he has breasted the approach from Scopus, as the Lord did, and countless others since His day and because of Him, from Olivet. The Mount itself is a water-shed; and when Jesus spoke of this mountain being "cast into the sea" was He visualizing the Mediterranean or almost glimpsing the Sea of Lot lying still in the crust of the earth's surface? Standing there, as He must have done a score of times, at "the descent of the Mount of Olives", He looked across at the Temple Area and on beyond the City Walls to the southward road with its fork to Bethlehem and straight ahead to Hebron, Beersheba, the Negeb and the frontiers of Egypt.

To the right His eyes would turn towards the "Samuel" country with the beginnings of prophecy, leading to the central plateau of Samaria; then northwards to the Galilee which claimed Him for its own. In between the two was the gap leading westwards to Jaffa (Joppa), passing close to the headquarters of the Tenth Legion, the home of the Maccabees, and not far from Emmaus, soon to make its own name safe for time, if not eternity, for the

¹ D. Baly, *The Geography of the Bible*, 167 f.

rich simplicity of the Resurrection scene, when He was known of them "in the breaking of bread".

Below His gaze lay the road to Jericho, past Gethsemane nestling in the upper reaches of the Kedron gorge, wending its way to the Dead Sea and the Jordan Valley. The road itself goes on and on to the lands of the Arabs and the Hagarenes, whence came the nomad tribes bursting into the lands of the Fertile Crescent.²

The Great North Road grows more full of history through all its bends and turns—the history of men and incidents, kings and prophets and apostles. But the road to Jericho owes its fame to a single story from the Master's store of Palestinian parables from human life—in this case, maybe, based on experience. "A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho". The road today must be much the same as in His time and for the millennia before Him. It is good for pilgrims to have walked this way in the reverse direction, and think of that last journey when "His face was steadfastly set toward Jerusalem". Some of the short cuts He took may yet be found. "When taken upwards a more hot and heavy way it is impossible to conceive, between blistered limestone rocks and in front the bare hills piled high, without shadow or verdure". So wrote George Adam Smith some eighty years ago.³

The road circles Olivet and past Gethsemane rises slightly so that the pilgrim looking back is rewarded with a parting glimpse of the walled city, today with the Mosque of 'Aqsa and the Dome of the Rock as prominent as the succession of Temples that adorned the Area. Maybe the traveller, soon to be beset by brigands, had started downward fresh from prayer in the same precincts. Across the valley lies Siloam, whose waters may go softly but which can hardly ever have been considered "a shady rill"! It was close to Ophel, the City of David, with a bit of wall considered Jebusite still visible.⁴

The road skirts rather than bisects Bethany with the memories of Palestinian hospitality to the uttermost as of the great words of Jesus, "I am the Resurrection and the life". The village, now become a centre for helping rehabilitation in five other villages with refugee homes rising out of the rocky hillsides, is known alike to

² It was through "Transjordan" and the Nabataean country that the (Baduin) Israelites and later the Arabs invaded Palestine.

³ *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, 264.

⁴ This paper has been written in the debt both of Baedeker's *Palestine and Syria* and the more up-to-date *The American Colony Palestine Guide*, the relevant pages being 125 ff. and 235 ff. respectively.

Muslims and Christians as *Al-'Azariyya*, for Lazarus is regarded as a saint by the devotees of both the faiths. Of course the place has its traditional sites—the tomb of Lazarus at the end of a descent of twenty-two steps; a Crusading ruined castle generally known as the House of Simon the Leper; the House of Mary and Martha, where, as so often in past history, there has this century been a convent. Over on the other side of the road is a Greek church, recalling that when the Master met the sisters it was outside the village.

Then comes the sharp descent with a few hair-pin bends at the foot of which lies the Apostles' Fountain (so-called) and a ruined inn. Here was the only water available and since the fifteenth century the assumption grew that the Apostles drank from the spring—the first opportunity since leaving the Jordan Valley. Probably most pilgrims, Jewish and then Christian, would not start the tedious climb without filling their jars previous to the ascent. In 1921 it took us from 4 a.m. till 1 p.m. for covering the miles between the place, where the new road forks with that to the Dead Sea, and Jerusalem. Jericho is fifteen miles as the crow flies but another six by road. Pilgrim crowds on foot or donkey would take much longer, resting in the heat of the day and probably bivouacking at night fall. In Bible times the great pilgrimages took place at seasons between the former and the latter rains.

Over on the right just beyond Bethany lies the hill village of Abu Dis, in a position that could command the ensuing stretch of lonely road. Last century it had the reputation of being "a nest of bandits", with the result that the Turkish Government had to provide escorts for travellers. This fact may well have contributed to the maintaining of the tradition that from this village there came the "thieves" in the great story. The point is that the road has been unsafe—"proverbially unsafe"—which fact has given it historical importance, since in addition to being the "boundary between the tribes of Judah and Benjamin", it was the route frequented by commercial travellers or pilgrim throngs—the very people whose affluence constituted a temptation to robbery on the high-road, which lasted down to Mandatory times—with the extension in the rebellion of 1936-1939 of dislocating the lines of communication through the demolition of bridges.⁵

⁵ There was a famous "hold-up" towards the end of the Mandate in which some interesting personalities were involved, including a (later) British Ambassador and the (then) Principal of the Jerusalem Girls' College.

For the road is lonely for the next five or six miles, the desolate view being broken in one fleeting glimpse on the sky-line to the left of At-Tayyibeh (not far from Bethel), perhaps Ophrah of the Abi-Ezrites and the "city called Ephraim" which provided our Lord with a retreat before the last hectic days in Jerusalem. Then comes the so-called "Good Samaritan Inn", in any case well-situated for a rest-house, till macadamized roads rendered stoppages less likely. The Arabs know the place as *Khan el-Ahmar*—the Red Inn—there being red bricks in the neighbourhood. These actually provided the surface of the Y.M.C.A. tennis courts in Jerusalem. The ruins of a castle above bespeak the interest of Crusaders in this unsafe road. Here is the traditional spot where the unwary traveller in the Lord's story fell a victim to the robbers.⁶

The thieves left him, as the Arabic version has it, between "living and dying". Not for nothing has the road both sides of the hill been called "The Ascent of Blood", its first literary references in Joshua. A couple of kilometres further on the road diverges. The right hand fork was built before the first war for the use of Muslim pilgrims en route for *Nabi Musa*, the Tomb of Moses, but it proved useful to the German-Turkish forces who made it much more serviceable. It is the one in general use; and the grave and mosque of Nabi Musa can be seen at a bend in the road. The celebration takes place at the time of Eastern Easter. The tomb is naturally only "reputed", but Islam has regarded Moses as one of its greater prophets. The observance of this pilgrimage became an offset to the Easter pilgrimages to the Holy City. It is only a few miles from the road running from Jericho to the Dead Sea.

It is the old road, steeper and rougher, which has more interest. This rises quickly to give a good view of the *Wadi el-Kelt*, which is a deep gorge that has its beginnings in 'Ain Fāra, "north-east of Jerusalem" and the traditional site of the Twenty-third Psalm.⁷ There have been two theories for the identification of this *wadi*, each connected with a prophet. For some it is the Brook Cherith, where the Baduin Arabs (not "ravens"!) supplied Elijah's bodily

⁶ Luke 10: 25-27. The place where the Good Samaritan met the road will probably never be known; since he may have come via Jerusalem, or struck off the Samaria-Judea road near Jiftlik or through "Ephraim"; or he may have been coming from the opposite direction on his way home; which might fit in with "when I come again I will repay thee", i.e., on the next commercial visit.

⁷ 'Ain Fara is probably the "Euphrates" of Jeremiah 13: 1-14.

needs twice daily.⁸ For others it is the “Valley of Achor” of which Hosea spoke, saying that it would issue in a “door of Hope”.⁹ Anyhow there is a watercourse there of which the Crusaders took advantage and their aqueduct has been reconditioned and used for the banana plantations below. On the opposite side of the gorge lies the Monastery of St. George, almost growing out of the side of the cliff.¹⁰ Here the close Palestinian (in fact Near Eastern) connection of St. George with Elijah should be borne in mind; for he is the same individual alike for Muslim, Jew and Christian, so far as his Palestinian connection is concerned. (The Muslims know him as *al-Khadr*—the Green One.)¹¹ The monastery is built on the “superstructure” of one erected in the time of Justinian the Emperor, who did much in the sixth century for the rebuilding of the Church of the Incarnation in Bethlehem.¹²

The final section of the descent of the *wadi* is very steep, and is called ‘Aqabat al-Jabr, at the foot of which today is one of the large refugee settlements, where thousands are congregated. By now we are on the Jericho Plain, itself nearly 800 feet below the sea. Its fertility, discovered and utilized by Lot, is as factual now as then.

There are holy sites in and around Jericho, the City of Palm Trees, as the mosaic map in the Orthodox Church at Madaba shows.¹³

1.—*Jabal Quruntal*—the corruption of *Quarantania*—the mountain of the Temptation, crowned with a monastery, with today another refugee settlement at the foot. The view is in full accord with the reference to the “Kingdoms of the world”.¹⁴ On clear days Mount Hermon is visible with its snowy battlements 180 miles away. Recent events have led to the suggestion that the Lord could also look from the grotto of His inward thoughts towards the other monastery of Qumrān. In the silent years as in the crowded days of ministry, He must often have passed the spot of His refusal of the pomps of this world, on the way to

⁸ 1 Kings 17: 1-7. This kind of treatment of a holy man is in keeping with the age-long hospitality of the Baduin.

⁹ Joshua 7: 24 f.; Hosea 2: 15; cf. *H.D.B.* i, 24.

¹⁰ This is still maintained but residents are few.

¹¹ See Hanauer, *Folklore of the Holy Land*, chapter ix.

¹² Hamilton, *The Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem*, 19 ff.

¹³ The map in mosaics in the Orthodox Church has a replica at the entrance to the great Jerusalem Y.M.C.A. See article by A. T. Chapman in *H.D.B.* iii, 309-10.

¹⁴ Matthew 4: 8; Luke 4: 5. The name recalls the Forty Days.

Jerusalem, for one or other of the feasts. It might well have been near the base of this "high mountain" that He told the Parable of the Talents—perhaps around a camp fire to keep the jackals away, the night before the climb upwards.¹⁵

2.—*Old Jericho*, dating back 5,000 years. It is a mound not yet fully excavated; but the unravelling of its history must be left to the competence of archaeology.¹⁶

3.—*Ain as-Sultān*: so the Muslims call it, perhaps from an Umayyad ruler of early Islamic times, since not far away is the Palace of Bait Mafjar and the rulers in Damascus came down from the cold to winter near Jericho. But the Christians have called it Elisha's Fountain these many centuries—the spring's water is collected in a pool and what a blessing to the refugee families today, thankful as were the sons of the prophets for Elisha's benefactions.¹⁷

4.—"*Jesus entered and passed through Jericho*". We retrace our steps towards the place where the Wadi Kelt debouches into the Jericho Plain; for the Jericho of Jesus was not the Neolithic mound of Rahab and the spies and the trumpet-blasts, but the Jericho developed by Herod the Great and Archelaus. Here was the sight of Bartimaeus restored, so that he was on the road that led to Jerusalem when he followed Him in the way. This was the Jericho of Zacchaeus, and the invitation to be the guest of a chief publican.¹⁸

The present Jericho occupies a site chosen by the Crusaders. In later days it fell into desuetude; but since 1948 its importance as the centre of activity amongst refugees has made it as busy as in the days of Zacchaeus. What has been accomplished these past ten years should have taken for good and all the sting out of the expletive, "Go to Jericho!" Why not, when Jesus entered and passed through and left a blessing behind Him, as those too who in these latter times have followed Him in the way?

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¹⁵ *Jesus of Palestine*, 209.

¹⁶ See the articles by Dr. Kathleen Kenyon in successive issues of the *Palestine Exploration Quarterly*, from 1954 to 1960.

¹⁷ 2 Kings 3: 19 ff.

¹⁸ Luke 18: 35-19: 10; cf. *Jesus of Palestine*, 205-8.