

THE "STEPPE OF MOAB."

THE district in which the Israelites encamped immediately before crossing the Jordan is termed by the Priestly Writer the "steppes of Moab." There is no difficulty in seeing that the district intended must be that which is at the present day known as the Ghôr es-Seisabân. This is a well defined district with sharply marked boundaries on three sides. Westwards it is bounded by the Jordan, southwards by the Dead Sea, and eastwards by the mountains which rise abruptly and rapidly to some 3,000 or 4,000 feet above its level: only on the north is its boundary a little indefinite; here it dies away into the narrower parts of the Jordan valley, where the mountains project further forward toward the river.

The district is flat, though it slopes some 200 or 300 feet from north and east to south and west; the drop is appreciable on the west within a short distance of the Jordan, but the fall southwards is hardly perceptible to the eye. Consequently the English version, by rendering the Hebrew phrase (עֲרֵבוֹת מוֹאָב) "the plains of Moab," is merely inaccurate and not misleading. From the Dead Sea northwards the Ghôr es-Seisabân extends about ten miles; from the hills on the east to the Jordan the breadth varies; at the extreme south from 'Ain Suwême to the Jordan it is (measured on the map) but little over three miles broad, but for the most part the breadth varies from five to seven miles. From Khurbet el-Kefrein, which is about half way between the southern and northern boundaries, the direct line to the Jordan is six miles. 'Ain Suwême and el-Kefrein may with some probability be identified respectively with Beth-jeshîmôth and Abel-Shiṭṭim¹ (distant from

¹ The connexion of Israel's encampments with Shiṭṭim (= Abel-Shiṭṭim) is mentioned also in earlier sources, Num. xxv. 1, Josh. ii. 1, iii. 1 (all J E), and Mic. vi. 5.

one another some five or six miles); these two places were, according to the statement in Numbers xxxiii. 49, the southern and northern limits of Israel's encampments, which extended westwards to the river.

The "steppes of Jericho," a term used by more than one Old Testament writer for the similar level on the west of Jordan, are familiar to nearly every visitor to Palestine. But the "steppes of Moab" are much less frequently visited, and even approximately adequate descriptions of them are few. Various spots have been described and ancient sites noted. But we owe to Dr. Tristram the most vivid description of the general characteristics of this country, and of the impression which it makes on one who sees it. Let me quote a part of what he says :—

We debouched on the plain close to where the stream from Heshban¹ issues. The vegetation had been rapidly changing with the temperature, and now both were truly tropical. . . . By the side of a cane-shaded stream, under a thorny nubk-tree, we sat down to lunch, and soon found ourselves surrounded by a gaping crowd. They were the very same who had stared at us in the Safieh [at the south-east end of the Dead Sea]. Meantime they had migrated northwards by the shore of the lake, to enjoy the spring pastures of the Seisabân.

Then, after describing his ramble to Beit-harran (=Beth-haran of Num. xxxii. 36) and back to camp, Dr. Tristram continues :—

My ramble gave me some idea of the extent of the Seisabân, by far the most extensive and luxuriant of any of the fertile lands bordering on the Dead Sea. *This abundantly watered and tree-covered district, often now knee-deep with green wheat, extends six miles from east to west, and ten to twelve from north to south.*² Looking at it from above, we can see how vastly it exceeds the oasis of Jericho; as well it may, with the exuberant gush of waters from the springs at the base of the range of the Moab mountains. Its extent and depth are by no means revealed by the glimpses to be

¹ The upper waters, I take it, of the stream which is called lower down the Wady er-Rameh.

² The italics are mine.

obtained from the hills above Jericho. But, like the Safieh, its thickets only afford covert for marauders.¹

With this description in mind, I thought myself justified in writing, much as Dr. Driver² (though apparently with some hesitation) had done before me, in my Commentary on "Numbers" (p. 307) with reference to the steppes of Moab, "This plain is covered with trees, and well watered." Since then I have myself ridden through the steppes of Moab, and I now feel that my statement requires considerable modification. I should prefer that the note should run: "This plain is watered by several streams, and contains some fertile spots; in many places it is covered with scrub and, along the course of the streams or around springs, with trees."

To suggest, as Dr. Tristram appears to do in the sentence cited above in italics, that the whole plain is fertile, like the oasis of Jericho, is altogether misleading. Far nearer the truth is Buhl,³ who speaks of the oasis of Jericho, and then adds that similar, *though smaller*, oases, covered with trees and cornfields, are found opposite on the east of Jordan. Dr. Tristram appears to have extended incautiously to the whole plain a description which well applies to the immediate neighbourhood of the Wady er-Rameh, especially as it would impress itself on one coming down, as he did, from the steep, bare, western slopes of Moab.

I was very far from covering the whole district, but I traversed much of it, and saw enough, I think, to form a

¹ *Land of Moab*, 347-349. The description given in Tristram's earlier work, *The Land of Israel* (ed. 2), p. 523 ff., gives on the whole a similar impression, though he there speaks also of "a comparatively barren flat" extending three or four miles S.E. of Nimrin (p. 527). The description, too, in the *Land of Moab*, p. 350, may also be taken in qualification of the passages cited above.

² *Deuteronomy*, p. 418.

³ *Geographie des alten Palästina*, 39. Similarly Schick in *Zeitschrift des deutschen Palästina-Vereins*, ii. 2.

fairly correct general impression of the whole; for the land is, as I have said, level, and trees rarely intercept the view, so that one sees well away in all directions as he rides. A brief description of the day which I spent in the Ghôr es-Seisabân may therefore serve to supplement or correct in some further detail the description given by Dr. Tristram—in particular to supplement it, for we did not cover precisely the same ground.

I left Jericho at 7.30 on the morning of March 14. It was a brilliant day, but much cooler than I had anticipated. I had with me a muleteer, who had accompanied me from Beirût, and an Arab of the Adwân tribe, Aḥmed by name, whom I engaged at Jericho to be my guide. The country east of Jordan is much more secure than it was thirty or perhaps even ten years ago, and it is possible to travel without a numerous escort. I at least suffered no inconvenience during the week which I spent across Jordan.

From Jericho I rode E.N.E. to the bridge over the Jordan, and thence, in an hour and forty minutes, at first E.S.E. along the track to Medeba, and then almost due south to the Wady er-Rameh, the lower course of the waters mentioned in the passage quoted above from Tristram. I struck this Wady at a point a little below the tomb of Fendi el-Fâiz, which is marked on the Palestine Exploration Fund map. From the Wady er-Rameh, still going almost due south and leaving Khurbet es-Suwême to the left, I reached the shore of the Dead Sea in an hour and thirty-five minutes. A ride of half an hour from this point took me to 'Ain Suwême, and finally, in about two hours more, I reached the Arab encampment just south of Tell er-Rameh, where I spent the night. It will thus be seen that I traversed almost the entire length of the Ghôr es-Seisabân by a line nearly bisecting its width, and re-traversed about half its length by a line close to its eastern border. The following impressions of this district are

based on, and to a large extent reproduced from, notes made at the time.

The trees and luxuriant growth which flank the Jordan, and have often been described, extend at this point further on the eastern than on the western side; on the west indeed just here they form but the merest fringe. On the east, too, this belt of verdure gives place immediately to scrub; there is no intermediate belt, as on the west, of white, barren, marl hillocks. From the river the ground rises slightly. Looking back (some twenty minutes after leaving the bridge) from a small mound or hill, the combination and distribution of colour was striking. The foreground was greyish, greenish, purplish, with stretches of sand colour where the soil showed through; then came the bright green belt along the banks of the Jordan, backed by the white, glistening hills or mounds of marl; then the level behind, sometimes darkish, green around Jericho, white northwards; further back again the whitish hills rising from the plain of Jericho, and finally the purple Judæan hills behind. Some of the wadies cutting through these hills (some eight miles away) showed with great distinctness. From this point we rode on, often encompassed by rising swarms of locusts, through a level country. There were frequent stretches of bright grass and flowers, some shrubs too, but often rather naked soil. We reached the Wady er-Rameh at 11.55, and here I drew up for nearly two hours. It was now getting hot, and the shade of a large tamarisk tree was very grateful. The Wady er-Rameh is a small and shallow stream, full (just here at least) of a small fish of about the size of a minnow; trees and bushes thickly line its course and overarch it. At this point the south bank is for a short distance steep, and perhaps twenty feet high, but for the most part the banks are quite low. Oleanders, some in blossom, abound, and there are many tamarisks and some other kinds of trees.

Herbage was thick and plentiful, and seemed to be much relished by our horses. By the time we left the Wady er-Rameh it had become very hot,¹ and the Dead Sea seemed to recede as we approached it. Most of the country was sterile, and there was no shade, save for a moment or two once or twice as we crossed a tree-lined wady. We passed one or two small groups of Bedawin, mainly women and children. Close to the shore of the Dead Sea where we reached it was a small piece of sedge and brake; along the shores much brushwood was lying, and a number of small trees with trunks, stems, and twigs bleached white, were standing in the water to perhaps a hundred feet out from the shore. After lingering no long time here I instructed the guide to make for 'Ain Suwême. We reached it in about half an hour. It is a delightful spot, for it affords that rare charm in this country—the sound of running, falling water. It rises under a rock. I could not feel the water actually at the spring, but just below it was distinctly warm. Almost immediately below its source the stream is dammed to secure by division a second stream, which irrigates a cultivated patch of land a little lower down. Around the spring were great flights of large birds with long necks, long beaks, white body, and white underwings, deeply fringed with black at the tail end. When standing to feed, with closed wings, their appearance is mainly white, the head yellowish, the tail brownish to blackish. Seen thus they look at a little distance like a flock of sheep, as my muleteer more than once remarked. These birds, Aḥmed informed me, are called Abu Sa'd (father of good-fortune), because they eat the locusts. This spot, and the neighbouring Khurbet Suwême, which lies about a mile away,² probably preserve the name

¹ Yet not hotter than on a really warm summer's day in England. But March, of course, is one of the colder months, and this year the season was, I understand, unusually cool.

² So the P.E.F. map, and this agrees with the relative positions of the two places so named to me. Schick (*Zeitschr. d. deutschen Palästina-*

of the ancient Beth-jeshîmôth, which is mentioned not only, as already stated, in connexion with the Israelite encampment in the steppes of Moab (Num. xxxiii. 49), but also by Ezekiel, who regards it as constituting, together with Ba'al-me'on and Kîryathaim, the "beauty" (צִבִּי) of the land of Moab. In the Book of Joshua it is named as belonging to Reuben (xiii. 20), or conquered by Israel (xii. 3).

The track north-east from 'Ain Suwême, which we followed to within a short distance of Tell er-Rameh, passes through a drearier country than that which we had followed in the morning. The herbage is scant, water rare, and the soil appears to be decidedly sterile.

Certainly the whole impression of the district left upon me by my day's ride seemed thoroughly to justify the ancient Hebrew description of it as "steppes" (עֲרֵבָת). It is watered by some small streams; in spring time (like the "wilderness," מִדְבָּר) it is in large part a green land, yet none the less, regarded as a whole, it rightly ranks, in spite of its fertile spots, among the dry and comparatively infertile tracts of Palestine. It might naturally have been in the minds of the writers who contrast the "wilderness" (מִדְבָּר) and "the parched" land (צִיָּה) and the "steppe"

Vereins, ii. 11) took half an hour from the spring to the ruin. The note in the *Survey of Eastern Palestine* (i. 156) reads somewhat ambiguously, as though the spring was close to the Khurbet; it runs thus: "Khurbet Sûeimeh (خربة سويمه). This is the Hebrew Beth Jeshîmôth (בית ישימות), House of Solitudes) mentioned in Numbers xxxiii. 49, Joshua xii. 3, xiii. 20, Ezekiel xxv. 9. It was known to Eusebius as being ten miles from Jericho, near the Dead Sea. There is a small sandy mound or tell here, covered with chips of pottery and glass, and some modern Arab graves; also a spring (see 'Ain Sûeimeh)." The note on 'Ain Sûeimeh is as follows: "This is a copious salt spring. It was visited at the end of October, and was found to have a temperature of 80° Fahr., the air being about 100°. It was drinkable, though brackish, and is perennial" (*ib.* p. 14). Tristram (*Land of Moab*, 350) appears to refer to 'Ain Suwême only. Neither the *Encyc. Bibl.* nor *Hastings' Dictionary* mentions both the modern sites, but the latter speaks of a well, by which perhaps the spring is intended. There is, of course, nothing strange in the spring being at some distance from the ruined town; the same is the case, for example, with Hesbân and 'Ain Hesbân.

(עֲרֵבָה) with the typically fertile or wooded districts—Carmel, Sharon, Lebanon (Isa. xxxv. 1 f.), or place wilderness in antithesis to Eden, and "steppe" in antithesis to the "garden of Yahweh" (Isa. li. 3).

What this land might be under careful irrigation is another question, but there are, I believe, fewer signs of ancient irrigation here than higher up the Jordan valley. I myself saw nothing of the kind except the slight attempt at 'Ain Suwême, to which I have already referred. Speaking comparatively, so far as I actually saw the two districts, I found the growth of herbage in the Ghôr es-Seisabân far less luxuriant than in the Ghôr east of Jordan opposite and south of Beisân, through which I was riding for some hours a week later.

According to a common, but not altogether certain, interpretation of Numbers xxi. 20, xxiii. 28, the district (or at least a part of it) which I have been describing was also known to the Israelites by another name—the Jeshîmôn, i.e. the Waste. This term, as far as we may judge from its usage and from the usage of the root from which it is derived, had a rather more sombre colour than עֲרֵבָה, steppe. It implies lack of water (Isa. xliii. 19, Ps. cvii. 4 f.; cp. Deut. xxxii. 10) and cultivation (Gen. xlvii. 19). It is applied to the "waterless wilderness of Judaea," which is, in the vivid phraseology of Dr. G. A. Smith, a "falling chaos."¹ Certainly if the district north-east of the Dead Sea was called Jeshîmôn, it was a considerably less dreary and disagreeable country than its namesake across the valley. Yet perhaps we hardly know enough of the degree of dreariness and desolation and waterlessness necessarily implied by the Hebrew word to argue from the actual character of the Ghôr es-Seisabân that it cannot have been called the Jeshîmôn; and we must, as often, be

¹ *Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, p. 513. See further the grim and striking description of this district, *ib.* p. 312 f.

content to be left with indecisive arguments, and a consequent ambiguity in interpretation. I am much inclined to question whether the fact that the name Beth-jeshîmôth (of whose *precise* meaning we cannot be certain) attached to a place lying in the district ought to have much if any weight in proving that the district itself was called the Jeshîmôn; and it must be remembered that the point (or points) which is said to look out or down (נשקף) upon the Jeshîmôn commands a view of the Jeshîmôn of Judah not less than of the Ghôr es-Seisabân. On the other hand there would be a greater fitness if the reference in Numbers xxiii. 28 were to the district where Israel was encamped rather than to the Jeshîmôn of Judah, a view of which is commanded by too many of the promontories of Moab for the sight of it to define the particular point which the writer is describing.

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