

The Stairs of the City of David, Neh. iii. 15, xii. 37.

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THE recent discovery by the Palestine Exploration Fund of a rock staircase in the Tyropœon Valley opens up the question as to the meaning of the expressions, "the stairs that go down from the city of David" in Neh. 3¹⁵, and "the stairs of the city of David" in Neh. 12³⁷. It is not here proposed to discuss the Jerusalem problem as to the portion of the city to be regarded as the "city of David," for the discussions of the past have settled nothing, and the spade is likely to end the controversy within a short time. I wish only to consider these stairs, — what we are to understand by the language of Nehemiah, and what we are to think of the stairs uncovered by Dr. F. J. Bliss, and described in a preliminary way by him in the *Quarterly Statement* of the Palestine Exploration Fund for October, 1896, pp. 301, 302.

Nehemiah's word is מַעְלֹת, plural of מַעְלָה, and does not mean stairs or steps necessarily. What it means in the titles of Psalms 120-134 is an open question; and in Isaiah 38⁸ it is not necessary to understand that the dial of Ahaz stood on a pedestal of steps; and in Amos 9⁶ the word has been rendered 'stories' or 'ascensions' or 'spheres,' and by the Revisers 'chambers,' raising a question not to be considered here. But, in the great majority of instances, *ma'āloth* must be understood to mean steps or stairs.

Thus the Israelites were commanded not to go up by steps (*ma'āloth*) to their altars lest their persons should be exposed (Exodus 20²⁶); Solomon's throne had six *ma'āloth* (1 Kings 10¹⁹); Jehu was hailed as king as he sat at the head of the *ma'āloth* in or by the side of his house at Ramoth Gilead (2 Kings 9¹³), — if a small house the stairs would be outside; if a house with a court within, the stairs would be by the side of the court and outside of the rooms (2 Kings 9¹³); Ezekiel tells of stairs or steps at the entrances of the courts of the Temple, of his conductor going up the steps at the east gate to measure its threshold (40⁶), of seven steps (40²²), eight (40^{31, 34, 37})

of the steps of the Temple porch (40⁴⁰), and of the stairs of the altar (43¹⁷). Here are ten instances in which the meaning is defined by circumstances. The LXX renders in some of these cases by *ἀναβαθμοί*, and this Greek equivalent is found in Acts 21³²⁻⁴⁰, when Paul is saved from the mob by being carried up the stairs of the castle by the soldiers, and from these stairs he spoke his defence.

The *Bibliotheca Sacra* for 1846, p. 612, has a note by Dr. Edward Robinson, who holds that the 'ascent' which the Queen of Sheba saw was a staircase, and that the 'terraces' which Solomon made of the trees from Ophir (2 Chr. 9¹¹) were staircases. But here we have a different Hebrew word, מַעְלֹת, which we need not now consider.

The commentators understand *ma'āloth* in Nehemiah to mean steps or stairs, and they have been influenced by the fact that rock-cut stairs are found in and about Jerusalem and in other parts of the country. Thus, in his *Archaeological Researches in Palestine* (ii. 454), Clermont Ganneau describes and figures "a large staircase cut in the rock at Beit Nettif," and says that "the staircase ascends by easy gradations along a sheer-cut, rocky wall, and from its wide low steps was doubtless meant to enable men heavily laden, and even beasts of burden, to mount it easily." He also says in the same connection, "Not far away we further noted the remains of a kind of road cut in the rock, with steps here and there."

In excavating in the vicinity of the Bishop's School and the Protestant Cemetery on the hill of Zion, the officers of the Fund and Mr. Henry Mawdsley found a flight of thirty-six steps cut in the rock. These are described in the Jerusalem Volume of the Palestine Exploration Fund Survey, p. 396, and are figured on plate xli accompanying the book. There is another staircase in the rock near Bir Ejub, the Well of Job or Joab, described in the same volume, pp. 372, 374, and figured on plate xliii. A staircase near the Virgin's Fountain is described in the same volume, p. 368, and figured on plates xlii and xliii. A staircase on the slope of Ophel is mentioned by Tristram in his *Land of Israel*, p. 185; but, although he took this to be the one referred to by Nehemiah, we now know that it was only a way to the Pool of Siloam. He also mentions on p. 194 "a rocky staircase which for several hundred feet serves as a road" near Bethany. In his *Journey in Palestine*, Boston, 1884, p. 100, Rev. John Worcester speaks thus of the ascent to the castle above Banias (Caesarea Philippi): "We rode up to the castle; the rocky path is in rude steps, some of which show deep prints of horses' hoofs, representing an immense amount of travel." See also *Bib. Sac.* for 1846,

pp. 424, 429, Conder's *Tent Work*, p. 193, and Josephus's *Antiquities*, xv. 11, 55, where he speaks of steps in a Jerusalem street.

In view of these facts it is not strange that Dr. Bliss, in excavating a paved street along the Tyropœon Valley, should have come upon steps extending the whole width of the street, some twenty-four feet, and bordered by substantial curbing. The account of Dr. Bliss is as follows :—

While pushing our tunnel, we came upon a slab of stone, with a step down from it. We examined the southern edge of the slab, and found steps descending. The width of the stairway is twenty-four feet. We followed them for forty feet, when the pavement continues level for twenty feet, at which point another step occurs. The number of the steps is thirty-four. They vary in height from seven to seven and a half inches, and are arranged in a system of wide and narrow treads alternately, the wide treads varying from four feet four inches to four feet ten inches, and the narrow ones from one foot three inches to one foot four inches. They are built of hard, well-jointed stones, finely polished by foot-wear. (*Quarterly Statement*, Oct. 1896, pp. 301, 302.)

As to these steps being those referred to in Nehemiah as the stairs of David, it is proper to say that great confusion exists in the locations hitherto conjecturally assigned to them by those who constructed theories on the subject without waiting for excavations. In his *Buried Cities and Bible Countries*, New York, 1892, the Rev. George St. Clair states that the stairs of Neh. 3¹⁵ "descend the Ophel slope westward into the bed of the Tyropœon" (p. 269), and he declares that the stairway of Neh. 12⁵ was "a different stairway" (p. 274). Again, in the *Recovery of Jerusalem*, London, 1871, it is stated that "the steps uncovered near the British Cemetery are considered by some to be those of the prophet Nehemiah, but the Rev. J. Barclay showed some steps at Siloam which answer more nearly to the Biblical description" (p. 280). Dr. Howard Crosby, in the commentary on Nehemiah in Schaff's *Lange*, placed the stairs in a diagram of the walls and gates which he annexed to the commentary, and showed that he conceived of them as running up the slope of Zion westward from the Tyropœon, in the narrow bottom of which he placed the king's gardens. Prof. H. E. Ryle, in the *Cambridge Bible for Schools*, commenting on Neh. 3¹⁵, understands that they were on the eastern slope of Ophel. He cites Prof. A. H. Sayce, who in the *Quarterly Statement* for October, 1883, p. 215, gives the strangest location of the gates which I have seen, and makes the stairs go along the eastern edge of Ophel.

It is unnecessary to follow up and disprove such conjectures, for the language of Nehemiah is now so plain as to leave no room for

these guesses of the past. Nehemiah says that Shallun repaired "the gate of the fountain, the wall of the pool of Siloah by the king's garden, and unto the stairs that go down from the city of David" (3¹⁵). Now the 'gate of the fountain' was certainly the lower point of this portion of wall and the 'stairs' were the higher point, and the portion repaired by Shallun was called the 'wall of the Pool of Siloah' because it passed near that pool, known to us as Siloam. Now the stairs uncovered by Dr. Bliss are within thirty feet of that pool or cistern.

Again, in Neh. 12³⁷, the account of the procession upon the completion of the walls, we read that they went up "by the stairs of the city of David at the going up of the wall." Here we seem from all the indications of the narrative to be upon the same spot on which Dr. Bliss has been at work with such valuable results already.

It should not be asserted that these stairs are as old as David's or Solomon's or Hezekiah's time. They may not be; they may have been renewed, if the wear of time required renewal. But they would seem to be, if not the identical stairs mentioned by Nehemiah, yet their successors *in situ*. But they are old enough to have been buried for centuries.

As to these alternate steps, one of moderate width and the next over four feet, the suggestion may be hazarded that this would enable horses to pass over them. Human beings would take all the steps, but animals might take the alternate ones. At least it is not unreasonable to suppose that horses passed here, those of Solomon and Jehoshaphat and Herod, on their way to the place known as Solomon's stables. The 'horse gate' of 2 Chr. 23¹⁵ Neh. 3³⁵ and Jer. 31⁴⁰ has not been determined, but it was clearly in this south-easterly portion of the defences.

After this paper was written further reports of the work carried on by Dr. Bliss showed that the stairs above described rested upon others which had been hewn in the rock, and which had become so fully worn out by travel that it was necessary to cover them with new stones cut to the same dimensions. These again had become much worn before they were covered up by debris. Dr. Bliss thoroughly excavated the valley in the immediate vicinity of the steps, and uncovered a remarkably well-preserved Christian church which had been built beside the Pool of Siloam. For a more complete account the reader is referred to the forthcoming volume in preparation by Dr. Bliss, to be published by the Palestine Exploration Fund.