

IDENTIFICATION OF THE ALTAR "ED."

AMONGST the famous places connected with the first conquest of Palestine by the Jews, it is remarkable that not one has as yet been discovered which can be attributed to them as original founders. Hebron, so famous as a sacred spot, was a city of the Canaanites. Jerusalem, only captured as late as the time of David, was strongly fortified by the Jebusites. The same is true of Shechem, of Kirjath Jearim, and of all the famous strongholds and sacred sites of the country. There was, however, one site, a monument erected for all the trans-Jordanic Israelites, a great work constructed by the labour of all their fighting men, dating from the very time of the conquest, and a sacred spot jealously regarded as vying with the divinely-appointed centre of worship at Jerusalem. The identification and exploration of such a site cannot fail to be considered as of the highest interest, and it is to this task that the present paper is devoted.

The account of this site is contained in the 22nd chapter of the book of Joshua. The survey of Palestine was complete, the divided portions had been allotted to the various tribes, and the success of the first incursion and rapid mountain campaign in Judæa, had been followed by a period of peace and repose. Joshua found, therefore, that the services of the two and a half tribes who had left their possessions beyond Jordan to assist in the conquest of Western Palestine were no longer of immediate importance, and they were permitted to return to their possessions and families, to the uplands of Gilead and the broad corn-plains of Bashan, which they had preferred to the barren hills of Judæa. From their tents at Shiloh they commenced their homeward march, with the benediction of their leader and their brethren, "with very much cattle, with silver and with gold, and with brass and with iron, and with very much raiment,"—spoils still dear to the wandering Bedouin.

"And when they came unto the borders of Jordan, that are in the land of Canaan, the children of Reuben and the children of Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh built there an altar by Jordan, a great altar to see to." (Josh. xxii. 10.)

The remainder of the chapter is devoted to the dispute which immediately arose, and its final settlement. The remaining tribes, seeing a place of sacrifice thus erected in the desert, supposed it intended as a rival to the expected altar at Jerusalem, and regarded it as a sign of separation and schism on the part of their brethren. Jealous of this apparent rivalry, or fearing to incur once more the wrath of Jehovah, they

prepared, with their ordinary impetuosity, to turn their swords from the Canaanite upon their own people and late allies. The explanation given to their heralds was, however, fortunately sufficient to satisfy their political or religious doubts, and to show that far from being intended as a mark of division or religious dissent, the monument was erected simply *as* a monument, a point which from beyond Jordan might be indicated as showing the relationship with their western brethren, if not a fortress to command the passage of the river and form an outpost for the eastern tribes.

The revulsion of popular feeling at once rendered the monument one of the most favourite sites in the country—a bond of union between the divided tribes. "The thing pleased the children of Israel. And the children of Reuben and the children of Gad called the the altar Ed: for it shall be a witness between us that the Lord is God" (verses 33, 34.)

In considering this account several indications of position are at once evident.

1st. The altar must have been in or near the direct route of the Reubenites, from Shiloh to the land of Gilead and Bashan. This route is very easily traceable. From Shiloh, the modern Seilun, a mountain road leads to the broad Wady Far'ah which I have had occasion to describe in identifying Ænon. The well-known Damieh Ford, the highway from all the eastern uplands to Central Palestine, and generally identified with the "City Adam," lies opposite to the opening of this broad valley. It was without doubt by this main passage, lying directly in their shortest route, that the returning tribes would have crossed in order to reach the oak-clad uplands of Mount Gilead, and the more northern corn-lands of the Hauran.

2nd. There can be no question that the altar was erected on the western side of Jordan. The words of the text allow of no other interpretation, and the very intention of the monument was to obviate the possible argument, "the Lord hath made Jordan a border between us and you," by continuing to hold a possession within the country of the remaining tribes.

There is, however, a verse in the account which, being *ill-translated* in the English, at first seems to militate against this second proposition. Ver. 11 speaks of the altar as "over against the land of Canaan, in the borders of Jordan, at the passage of the children of Israel." The Hebrew preposition, however, has, according to Gesenius, the meaning, *in the fore part, in front, that is to say, on the borders of the land of Canaan; whilst the ford or passage of the sons of Israel need not refer to the original passage at the smaller ford near Jericho, but should rather be taken to be that by which the children of Reuben had just passed.* The verse would read, therefore, "at the boundary of Canaan, by the Geliloth of Jordan, at the place where the Israelites crossed the river" to return to their eastern possessions.

3rd. The altar must have occupied a high and conspicuous position. The Septuagint translates the words used in the Hebrew μέγαν τοῦ ἰδεῖν;

the Vulgate, "altare infinitæ magnitudinis," an altar great to see. The Hebrew word, however, includes the idea of a *view*; and "an altar visible from a great distance," rather than of great size, is probably the correct translation. In confirmation of which we have the particle translated in English "at" Jordan, but in the Greek $\epsilon\tau\iota$, and in one of the Latin translations "super," *above*. The Hebrew (בְּיַרְדֵּן) is the same as the Arabic, which has the meaning of *raised above*, or *high up*. It is evident that so important a monument would not have been placed in an ordinary or inconspicuous position. It was intended as a landmark and a beacon to be seen from the eastern side, and there can be no doubt that some prominent natural object, a hill of peculiar form, or conspicuous from the eastern plateau, is the natural site to be looked for. Like most altars, it would be placed on a hill-top, and on one easily distinguishable in the range of the chalk peaks above the Jordan valley.

4th. The altar was no ordinary work. It was a "great altar." This, as we have just seen, is the direct meaning of the Hebrew, and the opinion of all the translators. It was no mere pile of stones put up in a single night, like the rude monuments of Jacob and Laban. The fighting men of two and a half tribes were concerned in its erection, and the fame of their work spread throughout the country. There is nothing to show that it was not a work of time, and the slow progress of Orientals on a journey well accords with the idea that they may have remained in the beautiful valley for some considerable period whilst engaged in constructing a monument which was to be an everlasting memorial of their share in the privileges and religious observances which were to find a centre at Jerusalem. As a monument, and not an altar, it may well have consisted of hewn stones, and in this it would have resembled the ancient beacons to be found in other conspicuous points throughout Palestine.

In concluding this part of the question, we may retranslate the most important passage as follows:—

"And when they came to the Gelilloth of Jordan, which are in the land of Canaan, the sons of Reuben and the sons of Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh, built an altar above Jordan—a great altar to be seen from far."

In passing we may pause a moment to glance at the word Gelilloth, usually translated *borders*. It is a word which has puzzled all commentators, and been variously explained. It is etymologically the same as Gilgal, and has been connected with the title of Galilee. It occurs in Josh. xviii. 17, where the Vulgate renders it "tumulos," and in the present chapter it is twice used and translated $\text{\AA}\lambda\lambda\alpha\alpha\delta$ in the Septuagint, and "tumulos" by Jerome in each case. The root from which both words come has the meaning of "rolling," and the Vulgate rendering of a *mound* is without doubt the most correct. Dean Stanley has supposed it to refer to the Ghor, or upper plain of Jordan, as distinguished from Ciccar, now called the Zor, or lower river channel. He translates it "circles," and suggested a connection with the Scotch

links, referring to the windings of Jordan. My late colleague pointed out that the Gelliloth mentioned in tracing the boundary line of Judah were in all probability the tells or artificial mounds near the ascent to Adummim, of which I have given a full account in a previous paper. The word, however, has a wider meaning in other passages, and refers to places in the Jordan valley where no tells exist.

The manner in which the descent from the Ghor to the Zor level takes place differs very much in various parts of the valley. Sometimes it is a continuous line of cliff, as near Beisan; sometimes, as in the narrow gorge north of Wady Far'ah, the upper plain almost disappears, and the lower reaches near to the foot of the hills; but more generally there are broad water channels and low marshy creeks, with salt springs and mud flats which run irregularly, leaving round islands with flat tops on the level of the Ghor or upper plain, and steep rounded slopes. The appearance presented by these isolated mounds and the broken undulating network of channels is, no doubt, that which is indicated by the expressive Hebrew term Gelliloth. It appears, therefore, that Dean Stanley's explanation is probably to be accepted as correct, but the term would not naturally apply to all parts of the valley, as in places none of these Gelliloth or isolated fragments of the upper plain exist.

From the internal evidence we are therefore able to point with tolerable accuracy to the approximate position and character of the great Witness Altar. It must be near and above Jordan, on some hill-top west of the river, between the modern village of Seilún and the ford of the Damieh, placed in a conspicuous position, and possibly giving ruins of some magnitude. In addition to which we should hope to find remains of the name in some modern Arabic word.

There is but one spot in Palestine which will fulfil these very definite requirements, and that spot is perhaps the most conspicuous in the country. From the heights of Ebal its sharp cone stands out against the white valley; from the castle of Kaukab el Hawa, near Gennesaret, it is visible at a distance of thirty miles; from the shores of the Dead Sea and the plains of Jericho it stands forth prominently as a great bastion closing the Jordan valley; from the eastern highlands it is no less conspicuous, and from the Judæan watershed it is visible at a great distance. Every traveller who has been to Jericho has seen it; all have asked what it is, and been disappointed to find that it was of no historical importance, and had only a modern Arabic name. For nearly a month I lived at its foot, firmly convinced that so conspicuous a landmark must have played a part in history, yet utterly puzzled as to what that part could have been. To every explorer it has been a point of interest, and yet I know of hardly one who has examined it. The place in question is the high cone of the Kurn Surtabeh, the Surtabeh of the Talmud, and one of the most important of our trigonometrical stations on the eastern border of the survey.

The Kurn Surtabeh is the culminating summit of an almost isolated

block of hill which closes in the broader part of the Jordan valley on the north. The whole block consists of white marl capped by a brown hard oolitic limestone of late cretaceous or eocene formation. The very marked inconformity of the lower beds causes a sort of separation which cuts off this mass from the uptilted beds of the central watershed. From the summit the whole valley of Jordan is spread out like a map. On the south lie the black groves round Elisha's fountain, the sharp peaks and shining waters and distant blue ranges round the Dead Sea. Nearer is the white cone, which rises, a miniature of the Kurn itself, against the sharp rocky precipices of the Mountain of Temptation, and which I have endeavoured to show is the "rock Oreb" of the book of Judges. Dark ranges close in to the watershed, shutting out the view of the first beacon station of the Rabbis on Olivet, whilst unseen in one of the narrow gorges lies 'Ain Fasail and the ruins of Phasaelis. On the east the great mountain wall stretches away north, broken only by the outline of the famous castle Kala'at el Rabad. At the very foot of the mountain, 2,000 feet below, lies a green plain. On one side a slope of nearly forty degrees stretches from the summit sheer to the base. The northern plain, gay with flowers and green with corn, is the mouth of the Wady Far'ah, a spot so charming that Vanderfelde has marked it on his map a "beautiful valley." The stream from the fountains of Enon flowing through it is nearly perennial, and in winter scarce fordable. Its course, hitherto unsuspected, was found by us to run south round the Kurn, and parallel with Jordan for about seven miles.

In the plain stands the little white dome of Abd el Kader, and the ruined traces of another great town of Jewish or Roman times, with a necropolis, having a fragmentary inscription in old Hebrew on one of its tombs. These ruins I suppose to be those of the town of Archelais, known to have been near this spot. Beyond the plain are rugged hills, with steep slopes, the valley here becoming a mere gorge, and in the far distance are the hills of Gilboa, Tabor, and Kaukab, with the narrow thread of the Sea of Galilee, and the white crest of Hermon beyond all.

Standing thus centrally as regards the eastern and western possessions of the tribes, the Kurn is very difficult of approach. The ancient road, cut in steps, arrives at the summit on the south, but on every side the valleys are deep, narrow, and impassable, and the only natural ascent is from the more gentle declivities on the north, by which the watershed of the block is reached, and followed along its tortuous course till it leads to the actual summit. The importance of this remark as to the point of ascent will be seen later.

The great peculiarity of the summit consists in the existence of a cone or tell, with sides sloping at 35 degs. and about 270 feet high on the west, where it joins a narrow plateau. On other sides the slope is sheer to the base of the mountain, and the work of walking round the cone, which was necessary in order to visit certain caverns, required, as I found, considerable resolution, for there is but little foothold on the

soft, shingly slope, and nothing stronger than the flower stems for the hands, whilst the view to the fallen blocks, 2,000 feet below, is trying to ordinary nerves.

There can be little doubt that this extraordinary cone is only in part natural. It bears a striking family likeness to the smaller peak near Jericho—the rock Oreb. Seen from the south the two come almost in line, the Kurn Surtabeh seeming a gigantic double of the other. This sort of formation is due to a hard cap of small extent upon a softer base bed, which is worn away by the rains into a conical form. The extreme regularity in the present instance leads however to the supposition that human skill increased the already marked peculiarity of form. The great mound at Herodium (Jebel Fureidis) seems to be another similar case.

The constructions which we found upon the summit of the tell, when leaving our horses at its base, we with difficulty struggled up, were of the highest interest. In an oblong area of about 30 by 100 yards, enclosed by a ruined wall of fine hewn blocks, is a great platform 18 ft. high, consisting of ten courses of stones beautifully cut, and averaging three or four feet in length, with a broad marginal draft. The platform is long and narrow, apparently solid, and of a most puzzling character. It was at once evident that it was either Jewish, or at the latest Roman work, and intended as a gigantic altar or beacon.

Careful search showed remains of fires, which had been kindled on part of it, and these we suppose to have been the beacons mentioned in the Talmud. The most striking point was, however, the great size and good workmanship of the stones, which were of great weight; and the labour of bringing them to the spot, hewn, as they must have been, at least below the foot of the tell, or 270 feet from their present position, shows that this work must have been a monument of no small importance. I discovered in a later visit the probable quarries whence the stone was brought, a series of caves in the south-eastern side of the hill, about the level of the little western plateau. The base of the tell on the side of this plateau is strewn with huge fallen blocks from the outer surrounding wall, and on the east lies a confused mass of fallen masonry, showing that the monument was once larger or probably more lofty than at present.

There are two other peculiarities in the ruins deserving notice. The first is a curious aqueduct, which runs round the whole mountain block. Careful levelling showed us that it was impossible this channel could have communicated with any existing spring. It was merely intended for the collection of surface drainage and rainfall, and leads to several large cement-lined cisterns on the north-east side of the cave. The second point is the apparent existence of an ancient garden or fruit yard—a series of terraces very visible from our camp in Wady Far'ah.

Such are the existing ruins. It now only remains to point out how perfectly this site fulfils the requirements for that of the Witness Altar. In the first place, the Kurn Surtabeh stands above the Damieh ford,

and beside the direct route to it from Seilún, or Shiloh, upon the western side of Jordan. Secondly, it is, as we have seen, a point remarkably conspicuous from a great distance on every side. Lastly, upon its summit remains to this day the ruin of a great monument of the kind indicated in the Bible account. At the foot of the mountain lie the Gelliloth of Jordan, the ground being of that peculiar broken character to which I suppose the word specially to refer.

When, in addition to these indications, we find a trace of the original name, the conclusion seems irresistible. For some time I sought this in vain on the map. It is a question which I leave to the learned whether there can be any connection between the name Surtabeh and the Hebrew (מֶזְבֵּחַ) Metzebah—the altar. The remaining summits of the block are called respectively El Musetterah, Ras el Kuneiterah, and Ras el Hafreh. The real name, as often happens, has deserted the place itself, but may still be traced in the neighbourhood. I have already pointed out that the natural ascent to the Kurn is from the north. On this side I find marked on our map as a valley name Tal'at Abu 'Ayd. *The ascent of the father of 'Ayd.* The peculiar use in the vernacular Arabic of the word Abu, as meaning that which produces, or leads to or possesses, would make the natural translation of this term to be, "The going up which leads to 'Ayd." Between the Arabic *'Ayd* and the Hebrew (אֵי), no scholar can fail to see the identity, and thus, though the monument itself has lost its real name, the ascent to the summit, by which the strong men of the two and a half tribes must have first gone up, preserved the memory of the Witness Altar.

To future travellers in Palestine, this identification cannot fail to be of the highest interest. From the ordinary camping ground at Jericho the great peak is distinctly visible, and no longer will stand out with a forgotten story, but rather as the greatest monument of the great deeds of that first conquest, and in the words of the last verse in the chapter, as a "witness between us that the Lord is God."

In conclusion, I feel I can point with some pride to this identification, as showing the satisfactory character of our work. It was not till after my return to England that I first turned attention to it. At the time, we could have no idea of the importance which would attach to the name Tal'at Abu 'Ayd, and it was merely collected by one of my non-commissioned officers with the same mechanical care and conscientiousness which marks the work of the whole party. The name has now served to clinch an important argument, and settle an identification of the highest interest.

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9th July, 1874.