

find both Shechem and Iskar (יִסְכָּר). If this latter be the Sychar of the gospel it is possible that it has no connection with the Hebrew word for "drunkard," but comes from a Hebrew and Aramaic root meaning "to be shut up." Sikra (סִיכְרָא) is noticed in the Talmud as the name of a place (Baba Metzia 42a, 83a), and En Sukar (עֵין סִיכָר), is also noticed in the Mishna, Menachoth vi. 2. The Samaritan Chronicle dates back to 1150 A.D.; the Arabic translation gives 'Askar as a rendering of the Samaritan Iskar, and as by comparison of other towns we find the Arabic evidently to intend the same place with the original, we see that the Samaritans themselves identify the modern 'Askar with an ancient Ischar or Sichar. The Arabic word means "a collection" (hence an army).

In writing on this subject (see Smith's Bible Dictionary, art. Sychar) Mr. Grove has remarked how much more naturally the narrative in the gospel would apply to a comparatively obscure site than to the very capital of Samaria itself.

"Then cometh he to a city of Samaria (ἐἰς πόλιν τῆς Σαμαρείας), which is called Sychar, near to the parcel of ground that Jacob gave to his son Joseph.

"Now, Jacob's well was there. . . ." (John iv. 5, 6.)

This description is most accurately applicable to 'Askar. The well of Jacob is situate at the point where the narrow vale of Shechem begins to broaden into the great plain of the Muknah (or Camp). It is about 2,000 yards east of the town of Nablus, which lies hidden from it. Immediately west lies the little village of *Balâta* with its fine spring and gardens. Little more than a third of a mile north-east is the tomb of Joseph, and from this a path gradually ascending leads to the village of 'Askar, which is visible from Jacob's Well. It is merely a modern mud village with no great indications of antiquity, but there are remains of ancient tombs near the road beneath it.

As regards the position of Shechem, it may be noticed that the ancient cemetery occupies the side of Mount Ebal above the modern one, and extends thence westward, being separated by about $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles from the site of 'Askar.

In confusing Shechem and Sychar Robinson has, as in other cases, followed that very monkish tradition of the middle ages which he so strongly condemns in other instances.

C. R. C.

THE AMERICAN EXPLORERS IN PALESTINE.

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BEIRUT, SYRIA, *May 10, 1877.*

THE better acquainted I become with the country east of the Jordan, the more I am amazed at its fertility and natural resources. The scenery everywhere among the Gilead hills is picturesque and beautiful. The forests and cultivated fields, the green valleys and grassy slopes, remind one of the park scenery in England. The hills in many parts

are well wooded, but besides this there are also dense forests of large fine old trees, such as are not elsewhere seen in this peeled and poverty-stricken land. The upper portion of Wady Yâbis is called "el Akhdar" —*i.e.*, the green, and its gardens and orchards, as well as its fields of grass, combine to render it a charming place. But Wady Ajlun surpasses the Yâbis in respect to cultivation and beauty, because it is larger, and the fountains which feed its copious stream are at a much higher level in the mountains. Ain Jenmeh is near the head of this wady, and the fountains and streams flowing among the olive trees and walnut groves there make this one of the most delightful valleys in Syria. There are three other flourishing villages, Ajlun, Anjara, and Keferenji, all except the latter in the immediate neighbourhood of Ain Jenmeh, and the valley at that point is full of ancient ruins, which extend clear up to Kallat er Rabad itself, showing that this locality has been occupied by towns or cities from remote times.

At one place on this wady I saw an orchard of unusual extent, in which there were at least eight kinds of fruit trees—the fig, olive, apricot, quince, plum, lemon, apple, and the pomegranate growing side by side. The valley is full of mills, flour-mills, of which I counted about twenty, but not all of them were in working order; and not only on this but on many other streams as well the number of ruined mills surprises one. For instance, on the line of the Zerka, or Jabbok, I counted between twenty and thirty ruined flour-mills, besides a very few that were in operation. I learn that in some cases the locality chosen for the site is not a good one, and the investment proves a failure; and in the more dangerous sections, as has doubtless been the case on the Zerka, the people have been either driven away or murdered, consequently the place and the business have been abandoned.

As yet I have only referred to the region of Jebel Ajlun, or the mountains of Gilead. But the great plateau which stretches eastward from the lake of Tiberias to the Lejah, and south to Dra (Edrei) and Gerash, is one vast natural wheat field. Some portions of this plateau are rocky, but these furnish excellent pasture; the soil, however, is for the most part tolerably free from stones, and the ploughman has no excuse for turning a crooked furrow. Those who are familiar only with the country west of the Jordan will perhaps hardly believe me when I state that on the Hauran plains I have seen in the ploughed fields furrows a mile and a mile and a half in continuous length, and as straight as one could draw a line.

The region south of Bozrah, towards Um el Jemal, and south-east of Dra, and east of Gerash, is full of ruined towns, and the soil is fertile and once supported a large population. For generations, however, this section has not been occupied, because life and property have been so insecure. But within a year or two past a good many families have gone in there and occupied some of the ruined towns, and are attempting to cultivate the land. They will succeed if they are not interfered with; but they are exposed to danger, and it is to be feared that the

Aneizeh Arabs are not yet sufficiently civilised to overcome their instincts for plunder. The people of El Hosn and of Dra informed us, however, that thus far these settlers had not been molested. The Hauran wheat is considered one of the very best kinds in Syria, and if the government would encourage the farmer, instead of oppressing and robbing him, this section would become a source of wealth to the country. It is difficult to exaggerate the extent and beauty of the vast plain about Fik, and along Wâdy 'Allan, and at Nawa, and those which stretch southward to Tel Ashtara, Mazarib, and Dra. This would be a paradise for the wheat-grower, if he could only be protected in his rights.

In searching for Biblical sites, I have followed up the whole line of the Zerka from its mouth to its source, and I find the valley pretty extensively cultivated. It being sixty-five or seventy miles in length its capacities are great, because the supply of water is abundant, and every acre could be reached by irrigating canals. There are already a multitude of farms in this valley, and the wheat-crop this year is good. With regard to the canals just referred to, the present cultivators of the land say that they dig no new ones, and the Arabs say that those which exist now have always existed there. There are on the hill-sides many unused canals, a few of which can be traced to a distance of five or ten miles. These remains show that in ancient times there was a perfect system of irrigation, by which not only the bottom land was brought under cultivation, but in some cases even the foot hills themselves. When the present farmers want to utilise a new piece of ground, all they have to do is to clear out and repair one of these old canals. Some of these canals exhibit such skilful engineering that I often wondered how the people of to-day, whether Arabs or fellahin, could have built them, until they assured me repeatedly that neither they nor their fathers had anything to do with their construction. They must have been built originally at great expense, for they lead under ledges, and around bold rocky cliffs, where only skilled workmen could carry them, and in one case the canal was carried along far up on the hill-side, keeping its level, and following the irregularities of the mountain to a great distance. The farmers generally combine and share the expense of keeping a certain canal in order, and then each will have specified days when he can use the water for himself.

I have in former letters mentioned the fact that the Jordan valley between the Zerka and Nimrin was quite barren, because there are no streams or fountains in the hills to water it; while north of the Zerka, where streams are numerous, the valley is clothed with wheat-fields and vegetation. Just south of the Zerka there are some traces of ancient canals, showing that a portion of the valley between the Zerka and the road leading from Nablûs to Es Salt was formerly under cultivation, although it is now a desert; excepting, of course, during the winter rains. Perhaps more than half of the Jordan valley (I speak always of the valley east of the river) is now reached by irrigating canals; and in

those sections not occupied by wheat-fields the thistles and weeds are rank, and grow as high as a horse's back, and often as high as the shoulders of a man on horseback, and form such dense jungles that it is almost impossible for a horse to make his way through them. I have examined the Jordan valley throughout its whole extent, with special reference to its being irrigated from the Jordan itself; and I am convinced that the project is very feasible. Every square mile not now irrigated could be watered from the Jordan, and the expense for a dam and canals would be small compared with the large number of square miles of valuable land that would thus be made productive. If we reckon the valley at sixty miles in length, and from two or three to six miles in width, we shall have 180 square miles of land as fertile as any prairie, and which, at twenty or twenty-five bushels per acre, would produce between 2,000,000 and 3,000,000 bushels of wheat. If it is objected that people could not live in the valley, the answer is, that the people who cultivate the soil there at present live there all the year round, and besides, the ruins of a dozen important towns along the line of the foot-hills show that the valley has been inhabited by civilised people at some time in the past. These remarks with regard to irrigation apply with equal force to the vast plains of Cœle-Syria, along the Leontes, and those of Hums and Hamma and others along the Orontes to the north. Give these plains and deserts water, and you can transform them into gardens.

If we go south of the Zerka we find the Jazer region, which the children of Reuben and the children of Gad once coveted as a fine pasture-ground for their cattle (Numb. xxxii.), still abounding in wheat fields and covered with numerous flocks and herds of the Bedouin. At Khurbet Sar there is a large plateau extending north and east a distance of three miles perhaps, and in this plateau is the watershed between the Zerka on the east, and wadys Keferein and Hesbân on the west and south. The region is studded with ruins, and among them I think I am able to identify some of the cities of the tribe of Gad.

In these notes I can only refer to the Belka or plains of Moab, which equal in fertility the most favoured sections of the country elsewhere, and which, when covered with wheat-fields and herds of cattle, as they are about the 1st of May, is not surpassed in beauty by any plain in England or America.

The wheat-fields at the mouth of wadys Keferein and Hesbân, as well as those in the upper Jordan valley between the Zerka and the Lake of Tiberias, are as fine as any in the world. In the former locality, *i.e.* on the Shittim plain, the harvest began about the middle of April, and farther north about the 1st of May.

Some of the tribes in the Jordan valley, north of the Zerka, cultivate their own land. But the more aristocratic Bedouin, like the Adwan, the Beni Sakhr, and the Beni Hassan, employ fellahin entirely. Along the upper Zerka, in the Jaazer region, in the fertile sections of the Shittim plain, and elsewhere, fellahin do all the work. Large numbers of Chris-

tians go out from Es Salt to the Zerka every year for the purpose of cultivating the land on shares. The peasant or farmer is given, at the beginning of the season, four or five or six dollars, as the case may be, and a pair of shoes at the outset. He also has seed furnished him; besides this he receives nothing. He must do all the work, from ploughing to threshing, furnish cattle and tools and men, and his own food; and at the end he receives one-fourth of the crop. I went one bright moonlight night to visit the theatre at Ammân, which, by actual measurement, I had found would seat upwards of 10,000 people; and in one of the corridors I aroused a man, who proved to be a "Saltee," as they are called, a Christian peasant from Es Salt, who was cultivating land for the Arabs, and who found here at night a temporary shelter for himself and his cattle.

A poor ignorant Christian cultivating land for a degraded and wretched Bedouin, the present nominal owner of the soil, and making his home in the ruins of a theatre that was once brilliant with ten thousand eager spectators gathered together from a city of churches and palaces and temples—the people of intelligence and wealth all gone, the people and buildings that remain sunk down into moral and physical ruin—is in human judgment a strange reversal of the law of progress, which gives rise to serious and painful reflections.

SELAH MERRILL.

DEIR EBAN, THE GREAT EBEN, AND EBEN HA-EZER.

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PARIS, October 20, 1876.

IN my last, very brief, report (Palestine Exploration Fund, *Quarterly Statement*, No. XIII., October, 1874, p. 279), I formally proposed the identification of *Deir Ebân* with the great *Eben* on which the ark was placed on its arrival at Ekron. I had long before arrived at this result; I have repeatedly spoken of it to several persons, especially Messrs. Drake and Conder, reserving to myself the right of dealing with the question in detail, and particularly the relation of the great *Eben* to *Eben ha-ezer*. Mr. C. R. Conder having in one of the recent *Statements* of the Palestine Exploration Fund (July, 1876, p. 49) proposed afresh to recognise in *Deir Ebân* the Hebrew word *Eben* (stone), and to locate *Eben ha-ezer* there, I am happy to see him partially adopt my theory, and I think I ought to seize this opportunity to set forth briefly the conclusions at which I long ago arrived on this subject.

(1) *The Great Eben*.—The Philistines, bringing back the ark on a waggon from Ekron to Beth-Shemesh, reach the verge of that city, now represented by Ain Shems (1 Sam. vi. 12); the waggon stops in the field of Joshua the Beth-Shemeshite, where there was a great stone (*Eben*); the ark is rested on the "great stone," a sacrifice is offered in this place,