

THE STONE OF BETHPHAGE.

THE recent discovery of the "Stone of Bethphage" has created considerable interest among Biblical students. Three months ago, on starting for a tour through the Holy Land, I was requested to inspect this monument and furnish a few details to the *Quarterly Statement of the Palestine Exploration Fund*.

Accordingly, on arriving at Jerusalem, I made inquiries respecting the stone, and was astonished to find that even the guides of the city had not heard of the discovery. Mr. Shapira, of Moabite pottery fame, was the first to assure me that the discovery was no cunningly devised fable; and he moreover informed me that the site of the monument was somewhere on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives. Dr. Chaplin further indicated the exact locality; and thus fortified with topographical knowledge, I set out with much pleasure to gaze upon the precious relic. Passing out of the Holy City by David's Gate, I followed the course of the walls by Mount Zion and the Temple Hill, then crossing the valley of the Kedron, I ascended by the village of Siloam to the spot on the Bethany road where Christ wept over Jerusalem. From this point I climbed the south slope of Olivet, and after reaching the Carmelite Nunnery near the summit of the ridge, I followed the mountain path which runs due east along the side of the hill for about half a mile. Here Olivet proper ends, and is separated from the high lands above Bethany by a deep valley, while the path is continued over a ridge of limestone rock which spans the valley, and forms a kind of natural bridge. Before reaching the ridge we turned to the left into a field of corn, and after searching in vain for some time, at length I came upon some old foundations and a huge square block of limestone rock.

Fortunately Mr. Shapira with his daughter approached the stone just as we were about to examine it, and proved of great assistance by their valuable suggestions in deciphering the faded paintings. The frescoes are upon the whole well executed, and are evidently the workmanship of skilful hands; the perspective of the figures is accurate and the colouring vivid.

That on the north side is already much defaced, in consequence of exposure to the weather and the rough handling of the fellahin. It is therefore fortunate that drawings have been made by Captain Guillemot, otherwise many interesting details would have been lost for ever. The subject of the picture is the master of the house at Bethphage granting permission to the two disciples to take the ass and colt to Christ. The animals occupy the centre, and the heads especially are drawn and coloured with much care. Nine or ten persons were originally depicted, but many of them are now well-nigh obliterated. The figures of the two apostles—probably SS. Peter and John—are on the right hand; one, holding the bridle, is leading away the ass, while the other, standing by the head, has his right hand raised, and is represented as

saying to the owner, "The Lord hath need of him." The figure in the foreground, and consequently the most prominent, is the master of the house, who, with outstretched hands, is granting permission to the disciples to take them away. At first this prominent figure was thought to be the Saviour, but on further consideration it became evident that this could not be the case, first, because the Saviour was not at Bethphage when the colt was taken; and secondly, a comparison of the picture with the fresco on the south side of the stone revealed the fact that, while the figure under consideration has no hair on the face, the Saviour depicted on the latter wears the Pauline tonsure, and consequently has a large beard. The figures in the background represent those spoken of by St. Mark: "And certain of them that stood there said unto them, What do ye loosing the colt?" At the bottom of the picture a well-executed face, looking downward, caused us much trouble, but from an inspection of Captain Guillemot's drawing, it is the face of a person who has just loosened the ass, and with the binding chain in hand, still retains a stooping posture.

In the background is the house at Bethphage, and the back door near to which the colt was tied. The place is evidently the courtyard or back part of the house, in accordance with the text of St. Mark xi. 4: "και εὑρον τον πῶλον δεδεμένον πρὸς την θύραν ἔξω ἐπιτοῦ ἀμφοδου," "And they found the colt tied by the door *without, at the back of the house,*" not "where two ways meet," as the English version translates it. Around the courtyard is a wall with a battlemented corner; and it is worthy of notice that leading up to the courtyard is an inclined sloping battlemented wall, suggesting the idea that the house, and consequently Bethphage itself, occupied an elevated position. The monument itself is near a level spot on the side of a hill, from 50 to 100 feet above the valley immediately below.

The fresco on the south side, facing Bethany, is the raising of Lazarus. And here the artist has shown his skill, not only in the arrangement of a complicated subject, but also in the superior finish of the details. Unfortunately the figures on the left side of the picture, including that of the Saviour, are much defaced, and the bottom part is well-nigh obliterated.

Christ, standing on the left side, has come to the tomb; Mary has fallen at His feet; Martha, on her knees, remains in a suppliant position. A third woman, perhaps Mary Magdalene, sits in front, looking in the same direction as the Saviour. Jesus has said, "Take ye away the stone," and a well-executed figure occupying the right corner is carrying away the huge stone taken from the mouth of the cave. The command, "Lazarus come forth," has been given by Him who had just said, "I am the resurrection and the life," and Lazarus, bound hand and foot with grave-clothes, is stepping forth from the sepulchral chamber.

On the west side of the stone, facing Jerusalem, it is said that the subject was a representation of the triumphal entry of Christ into the

Holy City on Palm Sunday, and there is no reason for disbelieving that this was the case; but at present the picture is so sadly marred that it is scarcely possible to trace the outline of a single figure. In the centre of this face a large niche, with a semicircular head, measuring two feet by one, has been cut deep into the stone. It seems to have been done subsequently to the fresco, but for what purpose it is difficult to say.

On the east side, which is probably the front of the stone, the picture contains about a dozen figures, all of whom, with one exception, are standing close together, as an attentive audience, listening to the person who, standing by himself, is addressing them with earnest mien. The compact arrangement of the figures made us at first conclude that the representation of a multitude was the ruling idea of the artist, and since other two of the frescoes are subjects connecting with Palm Sunday, we very naturally supposed that these constituted the multitude that followed the triumphal procession and cried, "Hosanna to the Son of David." On more minute examination, however, it was noticed that they bore no palms in their hands, and their faces were not turned towards the right, as they would have been had this picture been a continuation of the subjects on the north and west sides of the monument. Captain Guillemot suggests that the subject may be the blessing of the restoration of this little sanctuary. This may be so, but it ought to be observed that the figures are not looking out from the stone, but seem for the most part turned towards the speaker, who, judging from his demeanour, is neither praying nor praising, nor uttering a benediction, but fervently addressing an attentive audience. This being so, I would suggest that the picture represents the first scene in the Ascension—namely, the part where, having led out the disciples as far as to Bethany, Christ, before leaving His desponding apostles, is addressing to them words of comfort and assurance. This suggestion seems to acquire additional force from the consideration that the four frescoes, namely, the Loosing the Colt, the Raising of Lazarus, the Triumphal Entry, and the Ascension, are the four most striking events in the life of the Saviour that occurred near the spot where this monument stands. Moreover, as the Triumphal Entry faces Jerusalem, and the Raising of Lazarus faces Bethany, I would further suggest that the artist designed each of the four frescoes to face the scene of the picture, and therefore, that while Jerusalem is situated towards the west, and Bethany towards the south, that the traditional site of Bethphage was on the comparatively level table-land north of the stone, and the traditional site of the Ascension was the spot across the valley fronting the stone, where the road winds round the grassy mound towards the village of Bethany.

The monument has already been named the "Stone of Bethphage," and it is said to mark the spot where the village of Bethphage stood. Some there are who undervalue such an archaeological discovery, while others, in their ardent zeal, rush too hastily to conclusions, and in their anxiety to find the site of the long lost village, they give loose reins to their wishes, and conclude that this monument must needs mark the

site of Bethphage. Until such time as the public are in possession of the promised publication of Captain Guillemot on this recently discovered monument, it seems desirable not to indulge too freely in bold conjectures, and therefore my remarks will rather be of a suggestive than exhaustive nature, and will deal mainly, if not solely, with data already furnished. First, then, it seems to me that there is nothing in the frescoes themselves that tends to prove that the stone marks the site of Bethphage. It is true that the picture on the north side represents the loosing of the colt, an event that occurred at Bethphage; but if from the existence of such we conclude that the stone marks the site of Bethphage, then by parity of reasoning we might pronounce the site to be Bethany, because the south face represents the raising of Lazarus; or Jerusalem, because the side facing the west represents the triumphal entry of Christ into the Holy City. Beside the frescoes, however, some inscriptions were also found painted on the stone. No traces of such inscriptions were visible when we examined the monument six weeks ago, and I am therefore sorry to think that such have been obliterated. I had been informed that one inscription was, "Hic est Bethphage," and this seemed to establish the fact, not indeed that the stone necessarily marked the Bethphage of the Gospels, but that such was the traditional site in the days when the inscription was inscribed on the stone. On looking at the drawings of the mutilated inscriptions as furnished by Captain Guillemot, I am disappointed in not being able to find the words "Hic est Bethphage." There are, indeed, the words, "Hic est," and only part of the initial letter of the following word, now obliterated. And although it is impossible from our present data to say what that word was, yet, as the fragment of this initial letter is certainly not a part of the letter B, we are morally certain that the word was not Bethphage. The word Bethphage does certainly occur in juxtaposition with that of Hierosolyma (a mediæval name of Jerusalem) in an inscription found on a different part of the stone, but until the import of such inscription is better known than it is at present, the mere occurrence of the name Bethphage no more proves the spot to be Bethphage than the name Hierosolyma proves it to be the site of Jerusalem.

JAMES KING.
