

vengeance. But a new idea! Why not argue that the tomb was Saul's and that "the House of David" simply means "the tomb of the *father-in-law* (!) of David. For was not Saul buried in Zelah? and by some, I believe, "Zelah, Eleph" has been connected (*Quarterly Statement*, 1881, p. 147) with the eastern hill at Jerusalem.

I now claim to have disposed of the myth that the Upper City was Zion. Jerome seems to have been the publisher of this greatest work of fiction ever produced, for it has had a run of fifteen centuries, and is still in demand. It has not only imposed too long on unsuspecting folk, like myself, of cramped imagination, but it has also bewitched the writer of an impossible story whom I used to think too shrewd ever to mistake such fiction for fact. A few perhaps will be thankful for the dispelling of this patriotic concoction; most, however, will probably choose to believe an error rather than weary themselves in investigating the truth.

If any one wishes to defend either of the pseudo-Zions that I claim to have annihilated, let him do so.

"Vive, vale. Si quid novisti rectius istis
Candidus imperti; si non his utere mecum."

W. F. BIRCH.

THE DEAD SEA.

SOME observations which seemed to point to one conclusion claiming my interest in the autumn of 1854, when I was twice at the southern end of the Dead Sea for the purposes of my Art, have since remained in my mind as indications of peculiar features in its geological formation, and as I have never met with references to them, I will now beg your permission to invite the attention of Mr. Hull, or of any future investigator of the district, in order to have the truth on the point raised satisfactorily explained.

I will tell the facts as they came to my notice. My first journey to the district was made from Jerusalem with Mr. W. Beamont, of Warrington, who wrote a very interesting diary of his visit to the Holy Land, entitled "Journey in the East." A third friend was his son, the Rev. W. J. Beamont, of Trinity College, Cambridge, since deceased. We arrived and pitched our tent on the plain amid the trees, which, as the lake widens two miles or so northward of Usdûm, are thick and about 20 feet or more in height. As there was still enough daylight remaining, we set off to the border of the sea for a bathe. On approaching the coast it was noticeable that the trees on the north-eastern curve of the bay stood closer to the margin of the water than they could have been when first they emerged from the soil, and that into the water itself the whole of the once living forest of tamarisks, junipers, acacias, &c., descended, leafless, dead, and stark. But although the engulfment had

been gradual, and probably the work of some seasons, the trees furthest away from the shore were still with branches unbroken, and even with stems and upper twigs intact until the depth hid them. It was a sight with immediate caution to the swimmer, and we took the hint to go two or three hundred yards more to the north. None of us had bathed before in the waters.

I think we were all good swimmers, but when I dashed in and threw myself forward to get out of my depth, there was enough to do without observing my friends. The unusual degree of buoyancy in the briny liquid threw me off my balance, the salt stung my eyes, ears, and every abrasion on my skin, and I could scarcely tell in what direction I was striking out until I found myself carried by a current into a mass of stiff boughs of trees far off from and still deeper engulfed than those visible from the land.

Making allowance for decrease of height from the carrying away by the waters of the upper twigs, the depth here to the bottom on which the trees stood must have been about 25 feet. The land had therefore sunk thus much since the trees were flourishing. So far, the fact was not for the neighbourhood a startling one. It was an encroachment of the sea on the land by the sinking of the latter.

Two months later I came to the same neighbourhood again to paint at the spot chosen for my landscape, which was two miles more to the south than the point where we had bathed. This time, for considerations of health, and being without friends with independent interests, I encamped under the castle built on the high crag between the divided torrent bed in the Wâdy Zuarahahta. Before sunrise each morning I started with one Arab, Suleiman, to cross the plain to the shore of the narrowest part of the sea. It was in a line drawn from the mouth of the wâdy to the north-eastern base of Usdûm, only deflected slightly at this spot to escape the irregularities near the foot of the mount as it passed on somewhat more southwardly to the margin of the lake.

Varying our path to some degree one morning, my attention, about midway between the wâdy and the mount, was arrested by a circular opening in the earth, 7 or 8 feet in diameter. It was clearly not a well, its position forbade such idea; but what would in any case have made this evident was that the aperture was not vertical, but oblique, sloping from north-west to south-east. The perforation was so clearly made that the layers of the alluvial soil, some of larger and some of smaller pebbles, were clearly defined in the sectional surface of the circumference. I asked Suleiman what this aperture was. He answered unhesitatingly that it had been caused by a falling star, and after the raw suspicion that he spoke thus with the ordinary love of the marvellous for matters beyond Arab ken, I saw that no other theory could amount for the conditions of the case. Time was too precious for me then to linger long, but on closer scrutiny on that occasion, and on subsequent mornings, I observed that the perforated earth was only a crust of upheaved sand of about 10 feet or so in thickness, and that below in all directions was a hollow

cave about 20 feet in depth without water at the bottom, where I could see the *débris* of the pierced alluvial crust. Unfortunately, my task was too difficult a one to allow me to spare the time for descending into the pit, and thus I could not investigate it except from above; but what I saw of the cavity suggested that the whole plain, having been formed by alluvial washings, had been raised from the bed below by volcanic force; that it remained thus while underwood and trees grew upon it; that it probably was impervious to the water of the Salt Sea, but that the weight of this was gradually pressing it with its growth down, as I had found was already done at the spot where my friends and I bathed two miles or so further north.

When I left the neighbourhood I had the intention of returning there to paint more of the extraordinary and grand scenery of the Dead Sea, but the Art world are slow to exhibit interest in what is not "stale as chimes to dwellers in the market place," and therefore I have never since found myself near enough to the beach of Usdûm to make further investigations into the facts given above. It will be a great satisfaction to me now if some one competent to determine their true significance and value will direct his attention to them.

London, June 1st, 1885.

HOLMAN HUNT.
