

BEIT JIBRÎN AND TELL SANDAHANNAH.

By E. W. G. MASTERMAN.

THESE names, Beit Jibrîn and Tell Sandahannah, probably convey little to a large number of people who, as Biblical students or as tourists, are familiar with the most famous of the sites of Palestine. And yet they mark the sites of a succession of towns bearing various names which were very important indeed in bygone ages. I shall, in what follows, treat these two localities as one, as I think there is no doubt that historically they are one, and that the great fortified city—Mareshah, Moresbeth, Marissa—which flourished from some centuries before the period of the Hebrew monarchy down to shortly before the Christian era, is the direct predecessor of the city Betogabra, and the later Eleutheropolis. The last-named in Roman times arose almost at the foot of the Tell, and survived under various names through the Roman, Byzantine, Arab, and Crusading days as a city of great importance. The site is a beautiful one, surrounded by all the best country of the Shephelah—fruitful fields and great groves of olives, and, doubtless, in happier days, vineyards, orchards, and forests. It is, moreover, a most important meeting-place of great roads. Here converge roads from Hebron, from Jerusalem, and from the sites of other great cities which flourished along the foothills to the north and north-west. Through here pass well-worn routes to Ashkelon and Gaza, and to many once important sites to the south, such as Lachish and Beersheba. From this spot, when the city was named Eleutheropolis,¹ the distances of towns and cities were measured, and alongside many of the high roads to-day there still remain some of the milestones which recorded the distances of this city.

A city so situated upon the great approaches to the country of Judaea was necessarily fortified—as were similar sites in the debatable land between the Hebrews and the Philistines or Egyptians; and this position as a frontier fort was renewed in the unsettled days of the Crusades.

¹ In the *Onomasticon*.

There is abundant evidence in this small area of the successive civilizations which have here flourished through the ages. We have the cave-dwellers, who made their dwellings in the more ancient of the vast and complicated caves with which the hill-side of Tell Sandahannah is riddled. Excavation has shown that the hill-top has plentiful remains of the Hebrew monarchy. Of the succeeding period, when Greek civilization flourished, we have witnessed the uncovering by Bliss and Macalister of the plan of the whole ancient city, while the tombs of that period are unique in the land. Roman ruins of great walls and mosaics are overlaid by the fortifications of the Crusaders. The Crusading Church of St. Anna (originally doubtless a Byzantine foundation), the remains of which lie upon a hill to the north of the village, has given rise to the name "Sandahannah," applied to this lofty *tell*. The present village of a thousand inhabitants covers a mere fraction of the area of the great city of the earlier Christian centuries.

Beit Jibrîn has recently become of more practical interest to the residents and visitors to Palestine, because of the opening of a good motor-road by which this site can be included in one of the most fascinating and easy all-day motor-drives in Southern Palestine. Before briefly describing this drive I would like to mention something of my previous visits to this site. In the summer of 1893 I broke my journey to Gaza by spending a by no means too comfortable night, in company with Dr. A. Paterson, of Hebron, in a room of the Sheikh's house. My only interest then in Beit Jibrîn was what I had read of the wonderful caves there, and I broke my journey in order to get a hurried glimpse of them. In 1900, however, I had a much better opportunity, as I spent a few never-to-be-forgotten days with Dr. Bliss and Mr. (now Professor) Macalister, who were engaged in excavating the summit of Tell Sandahannah. Even more fascinating than the excavations were the visits I made with Mr. Macalister to the labyrinth of bell-shaped caves, to the great columbarium locally called *es-sūk* ("the market"), and to many tombs. Unfortunately the opening of tombs initiated, or stimulated, by our excavations, became for the natives of Beit Jibrîn an all too popular habit, and so, when the scientific excavations were over, the people occupied their abundant leisure by searching for further tombs to pillage. The result of some of these efforts were found (1901) by Dr. Peters, of New York, and Dr. Thiersch, of Munich, who,

when reaching this place a few months later, found the now famous "Painted Tombs of Marissa" rifled and irreparably injured, though still presenting features of considerable archaeological interest on account of the very curious paintings upon the walls—especially the animal figures. Dr. Peters shortly afterwards kindly asked me, with Dr. Merrill, the United States Consul in Jerusalem, to come and see the tombs. We had a delightful cross-country ride from Jerusalem, pitched our tents at the foot of Tell Sandahannah, and spent the next day in the tombs copying the couple of hundred Greek inscriptions rudely scratched up the soft walls.

My last visit to this site was in the spring of the present year (1926), when a visit there was a part of the programme of the International Archaeological Congress. The day's drive was all the more wonderful to me because of the difficulties of my previous visits. It seems even now difficult to realize that we did so much in one day; and yet we did it so easily that any average tourist could undertake it, if done as ours was, in the month of April. The weather was warm and sunny, the roads firm and hard, and the fields were green and bedecked with flowers. I should like very briefly to mention our route, in the hope that others may realize the opportunities now offered them to visit with ease and comfort a large section of country which, a few years ago, was only within reach of the leisurely traveller, prepared either to camp or to rough it for the night in native houses.

Our day's programme took us first to Bethlehem and the Church of the Nativity, so greatly improved since the war by the removal of the ugly screen in front of the sanctuary; then to the Pools of Solomon, now repaired and protected from defilement, and all three filled with clear blue water; and thence to Hebron, where we had the high privilege—seldom accorded to a large party like ours—of visiting the sacred Haram, the mosque over the traditional Cave of Machpelah, so long resolutely closed to the "Infidel." We viewed the cenotaphs, with their sumptuous embroidered coverings, which stand—or are supposed to stand—over the actual tombs of the Patriarchs in the cave below. We were invited to peer down the well-like opening and to view by the light of a lowered candle the floor of the cave itself. Rejoining our motor-cars we resumed our way. Returning a little by the road by which we came, we then turned off westwards and pursued a picturesque mountain road down

through winding valleys now showing great shelves of barren rock where once stood terraces for vineyards and olives. On reaching the foothills, the valleys opened out into rich corn lands dotted on all sides with clumps of ancient olive trees under some of which, a little short of our destination, we lunched; but our conductor would allow us no siesta, and soon we again mounted our cars, and in a few minutes reached the rather straggling and untidy village of Beit Jibrin. Time allowed of our seeing only two samples of the archaeological remains. We were first conducted, by the official guardian of the antiquities, to some remarkable mosaics, over which the Antiquities Department of the Government have raised a building for protection against wind, rain, and robbers. Two of these mosaics belonged to a Roman villa of about A.D. 200, but the largest, with many birds and beasts, which lies at a higher level, appears to have been the floor of a Christian church of some three centuries later.

We then took the road running southwards, passing the lofty Tell Sandahannah to our right and the ruins of the Church of St. Anna on the left, and so visited the famous Marissa tombs. Though guarded to some extent under the Turks when they were first found, they have been considerably damaged during the war, when all effort to protect them ceased. Besides wilful damage, great deterioration has set in through the effect of light and air upon the paintings; they have very much faded during the twenty-five years since I first visited them. One could not but be thankful, as one peered around at the half-perished procession of weird animals depicted on the walls of the tombs, that a permanent record of what they were like has been made in the facsimile paintings published in the P.E.F. volume, *The Painted Tombs of Marissa*.

Compelled to leave all too soon, we threaded our way northwards through the fine groves of ancient olive trees of Beit Jibrin and took the route along the remarkable north-to-south valley which marks off the division of the Shephelah from the mountains of Judaea. Our way lay through the frontier lands, the scene of many battles in the past. As we passed below the great hill of Tell Zakariya—once the strongly fortified Azekah—we noticed several milestones recording the fact that we were following a Roman road, doubtless traversed by many chariots in the early Christian centuries. We crossed a shoulder of the hill of 'Ain esh-Shems, with the remains of the convent

excavated by Dr. Mackenzie and Mr. Newton, and the *wely* where the finds were stored—where I had spent many hours in the two years just before the fateful 1914. We crossed the railway near the station formerly called Deir Aban (now Artuf), and obtained a near view of the flourishing little Jewish colony of that name with the lofty *wely* of Zorah towering up to our left. Then winding through the hills we reached the Jaffa-Jerusalem road at Bab-el-Wad, and rapidly ran home for a late tea.

The History of the Site.

Mareshah, under the name of Mukrashti, is mentioned in the Tell el-Amarna tablets. We gather from the context that it was a fortified city, as it is recorded that the people of Lachish (Tell el-Hesy)—a near neighbour to the east—seized the city from the representatives of the King of Egypt. Of the interesting period between this and the coming of the Hebrews, which has proved so fruitful in Egyptian remains in other excavations in Palestine, we know nothing; but it is difficult to imagine that records of these centuries are not still awaiting the spade of the excavator of the site. When the Hebrews came, according to Joshua xv, 42, Mareshah became one of the “cities of Judah in the Lowland.” In 2 Chron. xi, 8–12, Rehoboam is described as “building cities of defence for Judah,” of which Mareshah was one. “In every city he put shields and spears and made them exceeding strong,” but not strong enough to prevent Shishak from taking Jerusalem (2 Chron. xii, 9), of which Mareshah was an outpost. In the reign of King Asa “Zerah the Ethiopian, with an army of a thousand thousand and three hundred chariots,” came here and was defeated in “the Valley of Zephathah at Mareshah” (2 Chron. xiv, 9, 10). Mareshah was the native city of Eliazer ben Dodovah, who prophesied evil things against Jehoshaphat’s ships of Tarshish (2 Chron. xx, 37), and a more famous prophet came from there if—as many scholars believe—Moresheth-Gath, from which the Prophet Micah came, is identical with Mareshah (Micah i, 15; Jer. xxvi, 10). During the captivity of the Jews in Babylonia the Idumeans or Edomites, pushed north by the Nabateans, advanced into Judæan territory and occupied Mareshah. The evidence of the painted tombs teaches us also that the city was partially colonized by Phœnicians from Sidon.

Though Greek influence at this time softened the city's name to *Marissa*, the old name survives to-day at some ruins near by called Khurbet Mar'ash. In 163 B.C. Judas Maccabaeus "did not leave off fighting with the Idumeans, but pressed upon them on all sides and took from them the city of Hebron, and demolished all its fortifications, and set all its towers on fire, and burnt the country of the foreigners and the city Marissa" (Josephus, *Ant.*, XII, viii, 6). Half a century later (110 B.C.) John Hyrcanus "took Dora and Marissa, cities of Idumaea, and subdued all the Idumeans." He permitted them to stay in their country only on condition that they became Jews (Josephus, *Ant.*, XIII, ix, 1); but whatever restrictions the Maccabaeans imposed in their political liberties were removed by Pompey, who restored to it—as to other cities of importance—its freedom (*ibid.*, XIV, iv, 4), and Gabinius shortly afterwards re-fortified it (*ibid.*, XIV, v, 3). The end, however, of this hill-top city came in 40 B.C., when the Parthians finally destroyed it. The first mention of the reoccupation—probably on the site of Beit Jibrîn itself—is the account (Josephus, *Wars*, IV, viii, 1) of the destruction by Vespasian of all the strongholds of Idumaea, and his capture of two villages in the midst of Idumaea named Begabris (emended from "Betaris") and Caphertobas.

When next we find mention of the city is during the *pax Romana*, when people were no longer compelled, under conditions of difficulty and discomfort, to occupy the summits of lofty hills, but could build their houses in security near their springs and wells, their orchards and their cornfields. This happened at many sites in Palestine, and here led to the foundations of the new city being laid where Beit Jibrîn is to-day. Ptolemy, in the 2nd century, mentions it as *Betegabra*, and in the Talmud it occurs as *Beit Gabrin*. When beautified and enlarged in the 3rd century it received the name of *Eleutheropolis*. It became the seat of a bishop, roads on every side were measured from it as a centre. But there is clear evidence that this Greek name was never accepted by the Semites; the last mention of Eleutheropolis is in 796, when the city was destroyed by the Saracens. After that this Greek name so entirely disappeared that, when Dr. Robinson was making his "Researches" it was only by careful exploration and measurements from the known sites that he was able to prove that this had actually been the site of Eleutheropolis. His demonstration was so complete that it has never since been disputed.

The geographer el-Mukaddasi (10th century) mentions *Beit Jebril*—in another passage *Beit Jebra'il*—as one of the half-dozen great cities of the mountains of Palestine. It is “a city, partly in the hill country, partly in the plain. The district sends its produce to the capital [Ramleh]. It is the emporium for the neighbouring country, and a land of riches and plenty, possessing fine domains. The population, however, is now on the decrease and impotence has possession of many of its men.”

Istakhri and Ibn Haukal, in the same century, mention Beit Jibrín as one of the towns of “Filastin” conquered by the Arab General el-Amir Ibn el 'As. In the time of the Latin kingdom of Jerusalem it was called by the Crusaders *Gibelin*. It was fortified by King Fulk in 1134, was destroyed by Saladin after the battle of Hattin (1187), but was occupied in 1191 by Richard Cœur de Lion, and one of his armies camped here. Shortly afterwards the Knights of St. John erected a castle there, and to them doubtless belong the ruins of the Church of St. Anna. The Arab historian Yaḳūt of the 13th century mentions it as one of a dozen of the greatest cities of Palestine. It was destroyed by Beibars and never recovered its former prosperity. In 1551 the Turks—as is shown by a dated inscription on the spot—erected an irregular castle here. The town appears to have remained little but a village—a shadow of its old magnificence—and such it is to-day, an unattractive village of poor stone and mud dwellings inhabited by about a thousand Moslem fellahin.

Here, then, we have a site—or, if you will, two sites within two square miles—which has a long history of occupation as a fortified city from the earliest times right down to the Turkish regime. It was besieged by the Khabiri, fortified by Rehoboam, held by the later kings till the Babylonian invasion, and later by the Idumeans; it was captured by Judas Maccabæus, and later by John Hyrcanus, and finally destroyed by the Parthians. After being rebuilt, under the name Begabris, at the foot of the *tell*, it was destroyed by Vespasian. In the reign of Septimus Severus it had privileges and a new name conferred upon it, and entered upon some centuries of prosperity and greatness. After its destruction by the Moslems it again flourished during the Latin kingdom of Jerusalem, was captured by Saladin, recaptured by Richard, and held as an outpost of the diminished kingdom for over half a century.

The Site as a Field of Excavation.

Such a site is well worthy of our consideration as a site for further excavation. First, as regards the *tell*, only the Greek city, and that the latest, has been uncovered, and yet in the short three months which Dr. Bliss was able to excavate there no inconsiderable amount of archaeological finds were made. Not only was the whole ground-plan of the latest city laid bare, but a number (some 40) of Greek inscriptions, mostly imprecatory spells, were found, and also a collection of so-called "revenge dolls"—figures made of lead, named after an enemy, on which damage could be inflicted which, it was believed, would cause similar injury to the enemy by sympathetic magic.

The whole of this work lasted less than three months. On June 4th, as Dr. Bliss writes, "the camp was moved to Tell Sandahannah, and excavations were begun the next day. . . . On August 28th the *tell* had resumed the appearance it had when we first broke ground. A traveller walking the next day over its flat top would never have suspected that a few days before he could have strolled through the streets of a town, entered its houses, examined its walls, counted its towers."

What are three months for the excavation of such a site? I venture to say that we have here a site of quite exceptional promise—practically untouched, except as regards the Greek period. The extraordinary caves—though many have been mapped—yet present an unanswered problem as regards their origin, and the most ancient of all may quite possibly exist below the remains of the ancient city. The Hebrew city of Mareshah has been reached in only two trial pits, and the pre-Hebrew city which must have existed somewhere is completely undiscovered.¹ The site is not built upon; there is no *wely* and no modern cemetery to limit the field of work, and there are no trees requiring compensation for their removal. As has been shown, it is remarkably accessible by road and is not far from the railway at Deir Aban (Artuf). The heat in the dry season is mitigated by fresh breezes from the sea, and the rain, which is less here than in the mountains, should never interfere with the work for more than a few days at a time. I should judge the site is as healthy as any field of excavation in the land. It is a site where the often embarrassing problem of disposal of the rubbish is unusually

¹ See *Excavations in Palestine* (1898-1900), p. 32.

simple, for all the steep sides of the *tell* are available for the purpose, with loss to no one. The people of Beit Jibrîn, however much they may have been in recent years successful robbers of tombs, are not hostile to regular excavations, and they have by now, we may hope, been educated to the idea that "treasure hunting" is not the main object of the excavator. They have had a Government official dwelling in the village for some time to guard the existing antiquities. The *tell* itself would not require very expensive labour to clear it entirely—nothing, for example, compared with Tell el-Mutasellim or Tell Beisan or even, one might say, Gezer. On the *tell* there are no accumulations of Arab or Roman occupations, as the successive cities of the Christian centuries were built elsewhere. At a very few feet down the remains of the period of the Hebrew Monarchy would be reached. The history of the *tell*, its occupation by Idumeans, its close contact with the Philistines, and its history going back at least to the time of the XVIIIth Egyptian Dynasty, all suggest that the archaeological remains should be of special interest to students of the Old Testament. The possibility of pre-historic remains in the countless caves excavated in the hill is one which will appeal to many, and even if such were not forthcoming the problem of the origin of these caves is of sufficient importance to justify an expedition specially equipped for their complete investigation.

At the same time, should funds permit, there is a vast field for possible exploration among the abundant ruins around Beit Jibrîn itself. Of this village, Robinson (*Biblical Researches*, II, p. 25) writes as follows:—

"Here is a village, with ruins, apparently of different ages, and more extensive and massive than any we saw in Palestine, except the substructures of the ancient temple at Jerusalem and the Haram at Hebron. They consist of the remains of a fortress of immense strength, in the midst of an irregular rounded enclosure, encompassed by a very ancient and strong wall. This outer wall was built of large squared stones, uncemented. It has been mostly thrown down; but on the northern side it is still several feet in height, running along the southern bank of the water-bed of the wady which comes down from the E.N.E. In the other quarter also it is still distinctly to be traced. Along this wall on the inside, towards the west and north-west, is a row of ancient massive vaults with fine round arches

of apparently the same age as the wall itself. These are now nearly covered by the accumulated rubbish, yet some of them still serve as dwellings for the inhabitants. The northern wall of this exterior enclosure, representing the diameter from east to west, measured six hundred feet, and the other diameter cannot be much less. The character of this wall and of these vaults leaves no doubt that they are of Roman origin," etc.

In suggesting that the P.E.F. should take up this work it may be objected that a new site—a new *tell* with possibly a Biblical name—is likely to have a greater popular appeal. But it must be remembered that the number of really important *tells* favourable for excavation in Western Palestine is not very great. Some *tells* are occupied by buildings, others are too large for our resources, some hold out no promise of much return for our expenditure. Secondly, all archaeologists will agree that no *tell* should be abandoned after a very incomplete examination, such as that to which Tell Sandahannah was submitted, and the fact that the P.E.F. has already worked there and has published two volumes¹ dealing with the site is a strong reason that our Society, rather than another, should complete the unfinished work. Tell el-Mutassellim is now being excavated by the Americans, after an interval of many years, in a more thorough manner than was attempted when the Germans carried out their first, but very incomplete, work there some years ago, and this example of the completion of an abandoned site is one which we may be wise to take to heart.

Note.—I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness to Professor Macalister, who has read through my MS. and made several valuable suggested alterations and suggestions. He says: "I am cordially in sympathy with the proposal to return to Sandahannah, and if I were not fixed in my present job would envy the man who has the chance to do it scientifically."

¹ *Excavations in Palestine (1898-1900); Painted Tombs at Marissa (Mareshah).*
