A Journey to the Biblical Sites in Lower Egypt, etc

Greville J. Chester

To cite this article: Greville J. Chester (1880) A Journey to the Biblical Sites in Lower Egypt, etc, Palestine Exploration Quarterly, 12:3, 133-135, DOI: [10.1179/peq.1880.12.3.133](https://doi.org/10.1179/peq.1880.12.3.133)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1179/peq.1880.12.3.133>

Published online: 20 Nov 2013.

Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)

Article views: 17

View related articles [↗](#)

A JOURNEY TO THE BIBLICAL SITES IN LOWER EGYPT, ETC.

By GREVILLE J. CHESTER, B.A., Member of the Royal Archæological Institute.

THE work of the Palestine Exploration Fund could scarcely be deemed complete if Egypt were left out of the scope of its investigations. In the very first Book of the *Old Testament*, we read of Abram going during a famine to sojourn in the rich and fertile land of Egypt, and of his deceitful dealings with the king of that country, and on the very threshold of the *New Testament*, we are told of the flight of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Joseph with the Holy Child to the same place of refuge, and how it was that "out of Egypt God called his Son." In addition to this, much of the *Old Testament* relates to Egyptian transactions, and there is, in point of fact, scarcely a better or more striking commentary upon the inspired Prophets than the present state and aspect of the ancient Biblical cities of Lower Egypt.

So far as the writer can discover, there are no Arabic or Christian traditions in Egypt, relating to the visit of the Patriarch Abram, and Brugsch's identification of a place called in the monuments *T-en Moshè*, the Island or Riverbank of Moses, with the name of the great deliverer and law-giver, must at the best be considered very doubtful. ("Hist. of Egypt," ii, 112). With respect, however, to the "Flight into Egypt," and the sojourn of the Infant Christ in that ancient land, four traditions prevail to this day amongst the Copts, who are the representatives of the ancient Egyptians, and the inheritors to some extent of the traditions, as they are the actual possessors of the property of the ancient orthodox Church of Egypt.

The first of these traditions relates to the Crypt Church of Sitt Miriam, the Lady Mary, under the fine and curious Church of Abou-Sirgeh in the ancient Roman fortress of Kas'r or Dayr-esh-Shemmah at Mis'r Ateekeh, (Old Cairo). The church in question is a small subterraneous building of very early type, perhaps as early as the sixth or seventh century. It has three aisles, each side aisle being separated from the nave by two pillars taken from some earlier Greek or Roman structure. In the eastern, northern, and southern walls respectively, there is a niche with a slab sculptured with a cross at the bottom of each, and according to Coptic tradition, the Virgin and St. Joseph reposed in the side ones, and the Divine Child in that in the centre. His Holiness Kyrillos, the present Patriarch of the Copts, whom I questioned on the subject, declared that this tradition is at least as old as the crypt to which it relates.

The three other traditions are connected with the fountain and tree at Matareeyeh a few miles from Cairo in the immediate neighbourhood of

the ruins of Heliopolis (On). In a garden a little to the right of the road, presented with characteristic bad taste by the ex-Khediv to the Empress Eugénie, and now profaned by a French café, is a venerable *Gemaseh*, or sycamore-fig tree, under whose branches the Holy Family are traditionally reported to have rested at the time of the Flight. Another tradition relates that the Blessed Virgin concealed the Holy Child in a hole in the trunk, and that a spider spun its web over the aperture so as to conceal Him from His pursuers.* The present tree is said to be the successor of one which died some two centuries ago, but there is nothing in the appearance of the tree itself to militate against the idea that it is of a much greater antiquity, and the extreme longevity of the sycamore-fig is well known. Hard by is a fountain with a *sakieh*, fed probably by percolation from the Nile, but said to have been brackish until the Virgin bathed therein, when it became sweet. To these stories, I may add that it was interesting to one who in childhood in his native Norfolk had heard the legend which connects the white spots on the leaf of the "Blessed Thistle," with the milk of the Blessed Virgin, to find the road in the neighbourhood of Matareeyeh, bordered on both sides with luxuriant tufts of that beautiful plant.

Thus much being said about the local traditions, the writer would remark that the following notes are the result of a journey undertaken in the early part of the present year at the request of the Committee of the Palestine Exploration Fund, to visit the principal Biblical cities of Lower Egypt, and the places on the route of the Israelites at the Exodus, as proposed many years ago by Richter and Schleiden, and advocated afresh by Brugsch Bey, who, it must be confessed, has made but slight acknowledgment of the labour of his predecessors. The writer, in what he has to relate, has himself no particular theory to advocate with regard to the Exodus; all theories at present promulgated, presenting in his opinion, almost insuperable difficulties. His sole object has been to search after truth, and to relate as plainly as possible what he saw, in the hope that others may be aided in drawing safe conclusions from the facts stated and the observations made. He has not shrunk, however, from noting in passing anything which in his opinion makes for or against a theory, which most people will allow to be a brilliant one, and which, at all events *prima facie*, has much to commend it.

Upon one point, indeed, Herr Brugsch seems to have laid too little stress, although it tells in his own favour. It surely seems unlikely in the extreme that a multitude of people whose main object was to get out of the country as fast as possible—to go out into the wilderness or desert to sacrifice unto the Lord—a multitude laden, moreover, with rich plunder, and encumbered with flocks and herds—it surely seems unlikely in the extreme that they should, in the first instance, have gone utterly out of the way in the direction of Suez, and that through a hostile country, and through the very midst of their former enslavers, when they

* Bœdeker's Handbook.

might have gone out straight and by a short cut into the desert by the well-known "royal" route into Phœnicia.

It seems probable indeed that the term "Red Sea" adopted by the Authorised Version from the LXX, has put investigators on a wrong scent, and has even led a writer of such justly high renown as Professor G. Ebers to attempt to identify the Baal-Zephon of Scripture with Gebel Attâka, many miles below Suez. The name Baal-Zephon is clearly of Phœnician or Semitic origin, and to be looked for on the road to Syria, and not in a place so utterly remote from Phœnician influences as the desert Egyptian coast of the Red Sea. If one were asked where one could naturally expect to find a Baal-Zephon, one would instantly point to some spot in the direct route from Egypt into Syria, and it is in that very direction that Herr Brugsch finds indicated in the Papyri a Baal-Zapouni, which he seeks to identify with Mount Casius. Why I am compelled to question the correctness of this view will appear hereafter.

In the ensuing notes, I propose to speak separately of the principal sites visited in Lower Egypt, and then to give a more detailed account of my journey on the supposed route of the Hebrews at the time of the Exodus.

HELIOPOLIS.

SOME 9 miles from Cairo, and a short distance beyond Matareeyeh and the "Virgin's Tree" are the remains of Heliopolis, the City of the Sun-god Râ, called *An* by the ancient Egyptians, and *On* and *Beth-Shemesh*, the abode, that is, of the Sun, in Holy Scripture. In the LXX and Vulgate, it is called by its Greek equivalent "Ἡλιουπολις;" and in the LXX it is added to Pithom and Ramses, as being one of the "Strong," or rather "Temple" cities which were built by the oppressed Hebrews for the Egyptians. On was a priestly city and a place of learning, and its reputation was such that Plato is said to have studied there under the priests for no less a time than thirteen years. Joseph is believed also to have studied there, and it is expressly stated in the Book of Genesis (xli, 45), that the Pharaoh gave him to wife, Asenath, the daughter of a priest of On, named Potiphera, one, *i.e.*, dedicated to the Sun-god Râ. Although it never attained to the rank of a capital, Heliopolis was always a city of great celebrity. Here the worship of the Bull Mnevis, sacred to Râ, was established as early as the remote period of the second dynasty, under King Kakaoo, *circa* B.C. 4100–4751. The mystical bird called the *Benmu*, or Phoenix, was likewise venerated here, and speaking generally, On may be described as having been the centre of the worship of the deities connected with the sun. King Amenemhat I, the first King of the 12th dynasty, is said to have *restored* the shrine of Tum, the Evening-Sun-god, and to have laid the foundations of the great Temple of the Sun, in front of which amongst others was erected the noble obelisk, which still exists,