

## STUDIES IN PALESTINIAN GEOGRAPHY.

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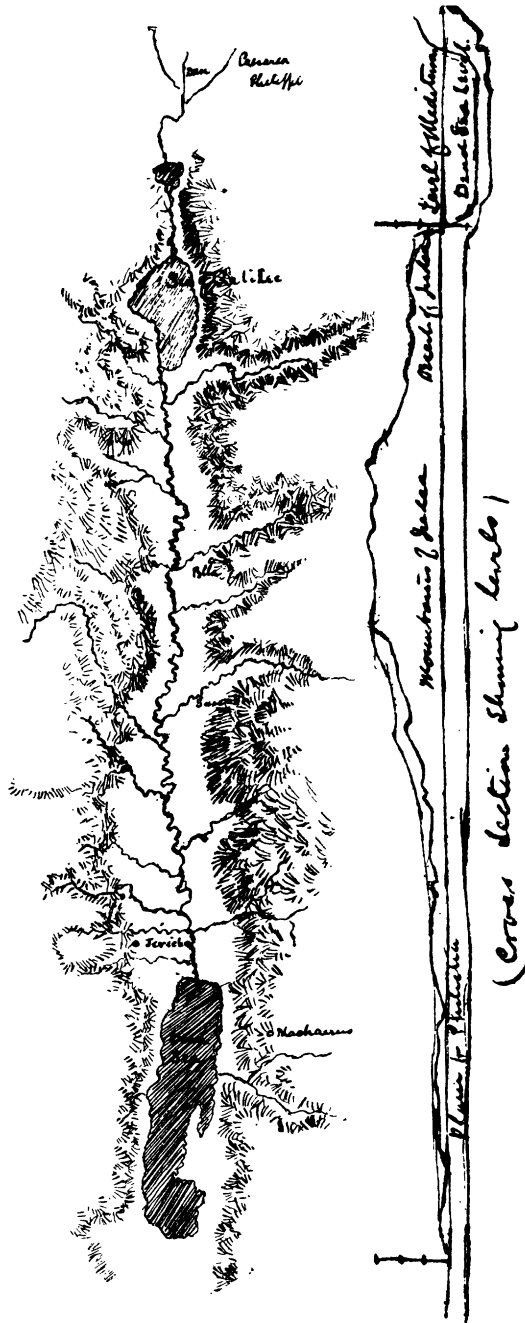
### VI. THE JORDAN VALLEY AND THE PEREA.

*Geological formation of Palestine.—The head-waters of the Jordan.—The Jordan between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea.—The plain of Jericho —The modern in contrast with the ancient Jericho.—The Dead Sea and its surroundings.—The district of Perea.—Remarkable and varied scenery of the Land of the Bible.*

IN order to gain some idea of the formation of the great cleft in which the Jordan flows, imagine the whole space now occupied by the mountains on both sides the river and the valley covered by the waters of the ocean. This, we are told by geologists (see Dawson's *Modern Science in Bible Lands*, Hull's *Mount Seir, Sinai, and Western Palestine*) was the condition in the Cretaceous Age, when the thick limestones of both the Lebanon and Judean hills were formed. Later the cretaceous beds underneath were "bent into folds," and the great limestone formations heaved above the water making the ridges which form the mountains of Western Palestine, on one side, and Eastern on the other, and leaving between them a great fracture which extended north and south for over 350 miles. On the western side of this fracture the earth's crust subsided and between the high mountains the deep hollow of Cœle-Syria, of the Dead Sea, and the Gulf of Akaba came into existence. The final form of this cleft was not reached, however, till that change in level which confined the Dead Sea to about its present dimensions and reduced the size of the Gulf of Akaba. Then came the order of sea, river-valley, lake and sources such as we now have them going from south to north. Taken all in all, it is not perhaps extravagant to say of it, as Humboldt once did, that "it is the most remarkable depression on the face of the earth." The

varied character of its lake, river, and plain scenery, the sharp descent of its rocky floor, the majestic forms of its mountain walls, the peculiarities of its climate, and the singular nature of its salt sea, make it full of interest apart from all historic associations. We can best come to these by a study of the physical features of the valley. Leaving out the Sea of Galilee which we have already briefly examined, we can for the sake of definiteness divide the remainder of the valley into three portions, (1) that from the sources of the Jordan to the Sea of Galilee, (2) that from the Sea of Galilee to the broad plain below Kurn Surtâbeh, (3) that of the broad plain itself and the Dead Sea.

Amid the varied and beautiful scenery of the slope of Mt. Hermon the Jordan begins, and its beginnings are in some respects as singular as its course and ending. It leaps into being from the great formations of Hasbeya and Baniyas and Dan, whose waters join in one stream in the plain of el-Huleh, just above the present lake of Merom. These springs are respectively 1700, 1140, 701 feet above the level of the sea, and out of each gushes a great body of cool, sweet water that hurries away to the plain. Just over us is the massive rock-front of Mt. Hermon whose summit is covered with snow. We are high enough to have all the products of a northern clime, and both Cesarea Philippi and the site of ancient Dan are justly noted for their rare natural positions. Of the latter it used to be said, "it had no want of anything that is in the earth" (Judges 18:10), and the spring that comes out like a river from the western slope of the mound on which the old city stood is said to be the largest single spring in the world. The fountain at Baniyas, where Greeks, Romans, and Jews alike have left traces of their presence, flows from under a mound which lies in front of a large cavern in the mountain side. This was the grotto of Pan, and Philip the Tetrarch who gave the place the name of Cesarea Philippi beautified the temple which Herod the Great placed by this fountain and grotto. What the fountain is to the region can be inferred from the words of another who describes the scene as it now is: "Everywhere around the ruins is a wild medley of



cascades, mulberry trees, fig trees, dashing torrents, festoons of vines, bubbling fountains, reeds and the mingled music of birds and waters." The traveler goes to this favored spot however, not so much because Herod and Philip built temples there, nor because the river begins there, but because the Lord came to it, after the Galilean ministry was virtually over, and there, away from the Pharisees, and amid surroundings almost wholly Gentile, received the confession of Peter which fully declared him. For several days the Lord remained here, talking of the sad issue so soon to come at Jerusalem, and once, at least, he climbed some spur of Hermon, where, in the solemn stillness of its exalted retirement, he was transfigured before them. Usually the modern traveler leaves "the Land" behind him, as from this place he mounts the ridge of Hermon on the way to Damascus, and the last prospect over the Upper Jordan Valley out upon the mountains of Upper Galilee and down toward the lake makes a happy conclusion of all his days of deeply interesting sight-seeing. Our study leads us to turn the other way, and going down through olive groves and oak glades we come to the plain of the waters of Merom, and keeping to the right we pass the marshes and the lake itself, and come to the rocks that hem in the river after it leaves this first lake. We have already made a considerable descent, for Banias is 1140 feet above the sea, and Merom only 373 feet. The lake of Huleh is about four miles long, and two and three-quarters broad, and the distance from it to the gorge is about two miles. As soon as the river strikes the edge of the narrow cleft between the precipitous hills which bound it on either side it plunges downward in a foaming, seething torrent over a course of about nine miles and descends nearly 900 feet to the level of the Sea of Galilee. For some distance before it reaches the sea it glides with smooth current through the delta it has formed, and passing the site of Bethsaida Julias and the plain, enters the lake. This part of the river has no special biblical interest. The great Damascus road crosses it about two miles below Lake Huleh.

Three times the perilous journey in a boat down the Jordan

from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea has been undertaken, and the interesting account of Lieutenant Lynch, U. S. N., the last who accomplished the task, in 1848, gives us a vivid picture of the sharp turns, the frequent rapids, the dangerous rocks, and precipitous banks which are found all down "the Ghor," as the Arabs call it. The valley differs in width and general character at different points, being for the first thirteen miles below the lake not more than four miles wide, then expanding to a width of over eight miles, which holds until we come to Tell Sakut (Succoth) when it narrows again to about one mile and so continues to the Wady Fârah when it broadens out considerably again, until south of Kurn Surtâbeh it opens into the "Circle" of the Jordan reaching a width of fourteen miles. The great plains are therefore opposite the valley which leads up to Esdraelon and over against the road which leads past Jericho up to Jerusalem. Why should this fertile valley be called Arabah, or desert, and in the New Testament the "Wilderness" (Mark 1: 4, 5)? Partly because of the heat; partly because of wild beasts which infested it, and partly because of the reaches of unhealthy soil in it, and the impossibility of irrigating certain portions of it. Speaking of this impossibility and of the trouble of wild beasts calls to mind the actual bed of the river itself. From the hills back of Jericho one can easily trace the course of the river through the plain by the tamarisks and semi-tropical trees that fringe its shore, and these do not stand up clear from the common level of the plain, but are in a depression which, opposite Jericho, is 200 feet deep, and sometimes one mile broad. In such a cut the river finds its way all down the valley and the banks of it are mostly white marl. This is the space the river floods, and amid these trees and tangles of bush and brake wild beasts made their hiding places. This was "the pride of the Jordan," meaning the "luxuriance" of growth along its immediate banks. Upon this level the receding floods left the wreckage of driftwood and overturned trees, and their deposits of mud. And when you come to the river itself, its turbulent muddy current is anything but inviting. This is particularly true of its lower portion. The bathing place of the pilgrims, as we saw it one bright afternoon

in April, was no such quiet inviting spot as pictures have made it, for the reason that pictures can give little idea of the swift muddy current that at the time of harvest overflows the banks and then recedes, leaving behind mud and disorder. Indeed, the whole river compared with the broad, noble streams which we dignify by this appellation is unworthy of the name. In a land, however, which knows only such water-courses as find their troubled way down through mountain gorges it ranks among the greatest.

In the valley down which we have come to the opening of the Jericho plains, there are several places of interest. On the plateau just south of the Jarmuk which drains the Hauran stood Gadara, the chief town of the "country of the Gadarenes." Below, resting on a mound several feet above the level of the river and about opposite the slopes of the Valley of Jezreel, was Pella, to which the Christians fled before the siege and destruction of Jerusalem by Titus. At the point where the Jabbok enters the valley is placed Succoth, sacred to the memory of Jacob, and on the site of the modern Teller-Rameh stood the large town of Livias and Julias. "All up the east of the river you come across patches of cultivation, the property of various Bedaween tribes on the highlands to the east."

It is a pleasing view that opens to the traveler who goes "down from Jerusalem to Jericho" as he comes to the edge of the mountains over the plain. A large sweep of valley from the sea to the protruding mountains by Surtâbeh on the north, and across to the hills of Moab on the east, is within the range of vision. What it might be if it were perfectly irrigated and a just government gave protection to those who cultivated it! It is not a good place to live in, for the tropical heats are enervating, but it would nobly respond to diligence in cultivation. As it now is, the dreariness of it but adds to the weariness in crossing it in order to come to the traditional spots on the Jordan, or to go to the shore of the Dead Sea. Over there, near the northern shore of the sea, may have been the sites of Sodom and Gomorrah; right before us is the stretch of the Jordan that "rolled back," and "away," that the host of Israel might come over. But the

point of greatest interest is close to us at the foot of the mountains. Who could recognize in the name of the miserable, filthy village of er-Riha a form of the word Jericho? Such, however, it is, and imagination has something to do to transform the wretched mud village into the stately "City of Palms," that flourished near by in the days of our Lord. Josephus speaks of it as a "divine region," and says that the fountain near by watered a tract "seventy stadia long by twenty broad, covered with beautiful gardens and groves of palms of various species." There seem to have been three distinct sites for the city at different times of her history. Joshua found it near the present fountain of Ain es Sultan; in the time of Christ it was further south toward the Wady Keel and nearer the direct road to Jerusalem. The modern er-Riha commemorates the Jericho of the Crusaders. One only has to remember that Herod lived much in Jericho to realize what kind of a city came suddenly to view as one neared the sharp descent into the valley. Palaces, baths, and theaters reared their stately forms amid the beautiful gardens and palm groves. It was, as one has called it, "the gateway of a province, the emporium for trade, the mistress of a great palm forest, woods of balsam and very rich gardens." Now there is not a trace of it. Back of the city, and forming part of the western wall of the plain is Mount Quarantania, whose summit has been fixed upon as the place of the temptation. It is, of course, a purely traditional site. These very heights back of Jericho have been one part of her weakness. The enervating climate has been the other, and over and over again she became the spoil of the conqueror.

It is a ride of several hours from the site of the ancient city to the Dead Sea, though its blue waters seem very near. As we come to the level of it we are nearly 4000 feet below Jerusalem, and 1290 below the level of the Mediterranean. Add to this the depth of the sea itself at the northeast corner, 1300 feet, and one gets some idea of this stupendous cleft that divides Judea and Moab. The Dead Sea is about fifty-three miles long and has an average width of nine or ten miles. It has no outlet, and that means much. The water escapes only by evaporation, and

either shows itself by a haze over the glassy surface, or in mists that at times gather into clouds which break in terrific storms. The streams which pour into it all carry a bit of salt in solution. Down at the southeastern end a ridge of rock salt five miles long and 300 feet high adds its quantum of salt, and springs in the sea itself help to make the water five times more salty than the ocean and fatal to all life. It is rightly called the Dead Sea. There is no body of water like it. Like the mountains of Judea over against the plains of Jericho; the wilderness over against the fertile valleys of Hebron; snowy Hermon over against the plain of Gennesaret, it stands in vivid contrast to the Sea of Galilee whose waters it constantly receives. The rock walls on either shore go up over 2000 feet, and are pierced at intervals by deep gorges. These mountains stand splendidly against the deep blue of the sea itself, and if one will know their fascinating glory, let him from the tower on Olivet watch the sun cast his light upon them toward the time of his sinking behind the western hills. Another has said that the history of this unique desolate sea "begins with the story of Sodom and Gomorrah and ends with the massacre of Massada." It has almost nothing that is happy to tell us. The one incident of the New Testament which brings us near its coast is the shameless murder of John the Baptist, who, according to Josephus, was beheaded in the gloomy fortress of Machærus on the eastern shore.

Such is the variety of scene, of level, and of climate from Bania to Jebel Usdum. The Jordan was the great "divider" as well as the swift "descender." That rift was the real boundary of the western land. It is at your right at every view that you may have toward the east as you go northward from Judea. The high levels on the other side have always been, as it were, "apart." It was more than merely a river crossing to go "over Jordan," and while at times the river has not been the western boundary of the people, yet the sense of the dividing influence of the valley is clear enough in the Scripture.

Inasmuch as our Lord's ministry touched one of these divisions which, though east of the valley, was yet reckoned as one of the divisions of the western side, it will be well for a few



moments to look at Perea. As the name signifies, it is the region "beyond" the Jordan, and it could be used of territory of different limits. It probably extended from the Arnon to the Jarmuk. It was given by Herod to Antipas and was reckoned as with Galilee and contained a Jewish population. One could cross over the Jordan just below the Sea of Galilee and then back again to Jericho and so reach Jerusalem without going through Samaria. Into this region Christ came upon his final departure from Galilee (Matt. 19 : 1 ; Mark 10 : 11).

Such, in brief outline, is the geography of Palestine. One cannot come from journeying up and down through its valleys, and over its plains, without realizing how great is the variety in the small territory which the whole land embraces.

Not only for its central position, but for its own self, it was chosen in the providence of God. Mountain, valley, river, lake and sea ; heights far enough above the sea to have the glory of a snow crown, depressions far enough below the level of the sea to yield the fruits of the tropics ; wildernesses desolate in their barrenness and plains with all variety of products ; springs that give a perpetual outflow of life, and fountains that make rivers, and a lake that called about it a varied activity. All these are reflected in the imagery of the Book whose history is inseparably associated with them, and whose pages in their very settings of truth have something for all lands and climes.