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THE POSITION OF THE ALTAR OF BURNT SACRIFICE IN THE TEMPLE OF JERUSALEM.

By COLONEL SIR C. M. WATSON, K.C.M.G., C.B., M.A.

AMONG the questions of ancient sites in the city of Jerusalem, respecting which there are differences of opinion, as held by various authorities, is included that of the Altar of Burnt Sacrifice in the successive Temples at Jerusalem, from the original foundation by King Solomon, down to the complete destruction of the sacred building by the Emperor Titus after his capture of the city.

Of the various opinions which have been put forward from time to time by writers on the subject, there are two only which are generally received as probable, and which it is necessary to discuss. Of these the first is that the Altar stood on the Sakhira, the sacred rock, which at the present time forms the floor of the magnificent Mohammedan building, the Dome of the Rock, commonly but erroneously called the Mosque of Omar; the second theory is that, while the Holy of Holies of the Temple stood over the sacred Rock, the Altar was placed on the comparatively level ground to the east, with its centre point about 180 feet distant from the back interior wall of the Holy of Holies.

In an article which I contributed to the *Quarterly Statement*, in January, 1896, in which a reconstruction of the Temple was suggested, based upon the different documentary authorities and on the results of exploration during recent years, I pointed out that a careful study of the question seemed to make it quite clear that the only solution of the question which would satisfy *all* the conditions, so far as our present knowledge goes, was to place the Holy of Holies over the Sakhira, and the Altar to the eastward of it. The article in question was illustrated by plans, so as to enable the reader to understand the data upon which the conclusions were based.

I had hoped, at the time of writing the paper, that there would have been some discussion as to the probable site of the Altar, as the presentation of different views is of great value in arriving at the solution of a difficult question; but this point was not taken up in

the *Quarterly Statement*. Recently, however, the subject has been re-opened, and by a writer of the highest authority on the topography of Palestine, Dr. G. Adam Smith, in his great work¹ on Jerusalem, a work for which all those who are interested in the history of the Holy City are deeply indebted to him.

In this work, Dr. G. Adam Smith has discussed at considerable length the question of the probable site of the altar in the Temple, and has given his reasons for arriving at the conclusions that the altar was placed on the Sakhra, and that the Temple itself stood to the westward of the holy Rock. As, on the other hand, it appears to be impossible to accept this view as probable, I think that it may be of some interest to those who care to study the question, to repeat and expand the arguments on the other side of the subject, which I alluded to briefly in the article already referred to.

But, in the first place, it will be advisable to quote what Dr. Smith has said respecting the Altar, so as to save readers the trouble of having to refer to his book.

After describing the probable position of the Temple, he goes on as follows :²—

“The exact position of the Temple may be reasonably estimated “from the data of Josephus and the Mishna, and from the character “of the Rock es-Sakhra and its surrounding contours. Josephus “says that ‘at first the highest level ground on the Hill was hardly “sufficient for the Temple and the Altar,’ that is the Altar of burnt- “offering in front of the Temple ; and that Solomon and the people “of subsequent periods built walls and banks till the Hill was “made broad. But the summit of the Hill is es-Sakhra, and the “rock levels about it suit the levels of the Temple-Courts as given “in the Mishna. Moreover, the Rock es-Sakhra, now under the “Dome of the Mosque of Omar, is venerated by Mohammedans as “second only to the shrine of Mecca. From the tenacity with “which such sites in the East preserve their character, we may “infer that in ancient times also the Rock was holy ; and “Prof. Stade points out that as angels are represented in the “Old Testament as appearing on rocks, it is probable that the “appearance of the angel to David by the threshing-floor, *between*

¹ *Jerusalem, the Topography, Economics and History from the Earliest Times to A.D. 70*. By George Adam Smith, D.D., LL.D. Hodder and Stoughton. London. 1908.

² See *Jerusalem*, Vol. II, Chapter 3, p. 59.

"*earth and heaven*, was believed to have taken place on this very summit. Moreover, the Rock itself bears proof of having been used as an altar. A channel penetrates from the surface to a little cave below, whence a conduit descends through the body of the Hill; obviously designed to carry off either the blood or the refuse of sacrifices. From all these data the conclusion is reasonable that the Rock es-Sakhra represents the Altar of Burnt-offering. But as this lay to the east of the Temple, we must place the site of the latter to the west of es-Sakhra. In that case the western end of the Temple stood upon some of those substructures, which, as Josephus emphasises, were frequently laid down from the time of Solomon onwards."

After describing the Temple of Solomon, Dr. Smith says¹ :—

"In the description of Solomon's Temple, there is no word of his having constructed an altar. Though in other parts of his history *a bronze altar before Jahveh* is mentioned, the probability is that this was a subsequent invention, and that Solomon, at least at first, simply used the bare Rock es-Sakhra for his sacrifices. In a later reign we shall find a bronze altar in the forecourt of the Temple, but this also may have been constructed on the same rock, the surface of which is sufficient for its stated dimensions."

Dr. Smith considers that in Herod's Temple also, the Altar was placed upon the Sakhra² :—

"Twelve broad steps descended from the House to the Court of the Priests, covering nearly all the 22 cubits which separated the Porch from the Altar. This was the space between the Temple and the Altar. No one might stand here while the priest was within offering incense. A little to the south of the steps stood the great Laver which had replaced the Bronze Sea of Solomon's Temple. We have seen reason to believe that the Altar rose upon the Rock es-Sakhra. In Herod's Temple the Altar, of unhewn stones, was a massive structure whose base must have been adapted to the irregular surface of the rock; and, conformably to this, tradition says it was laid in concrete. The base was 32 cubits square and one high."

He then goes on to describe the construction of the Altar, as given in the Middoth, but it is unnecessary to quote this, as it does not bear upon the question of site.

¹ See *Jerusalem*, Vol. II, p. 64.

² See *ibid.*, p. 505.

Dr. Smith's views upon the subject may be summed up as follows:—

1. That it is uncertain whether King Solomon built an Altar, and that he probably used the bare Rock of the Sakhra as the place of the burnt sacrifices.

2. That when the Altar was erected, either by Solomon or his successors, it was placed on the Rock of the Sakhra, and there continued until the destruction of the Temple.

3. That the Temple was built on the sloping side of Mount Moriah to the west of the rock of the Sakhra.

As regards the first point, it is very difficult to accept the theory that Solomon did not use an Altar of burnt-sacrifice. There can be no doubt that King David erected an Altar on the threshing-floor of Araunah the Jebusite, and it is impossible to believe that his son removed this Altar, which was really the central point of the Temple buildings. It is much more likely that Solomon reconstructed or enlarged the Altar erected by his father, than that he made any change in the position that David had selected. Maimonides in the *Beth Habbechereh* is quite clear upon this point when he says¹:—

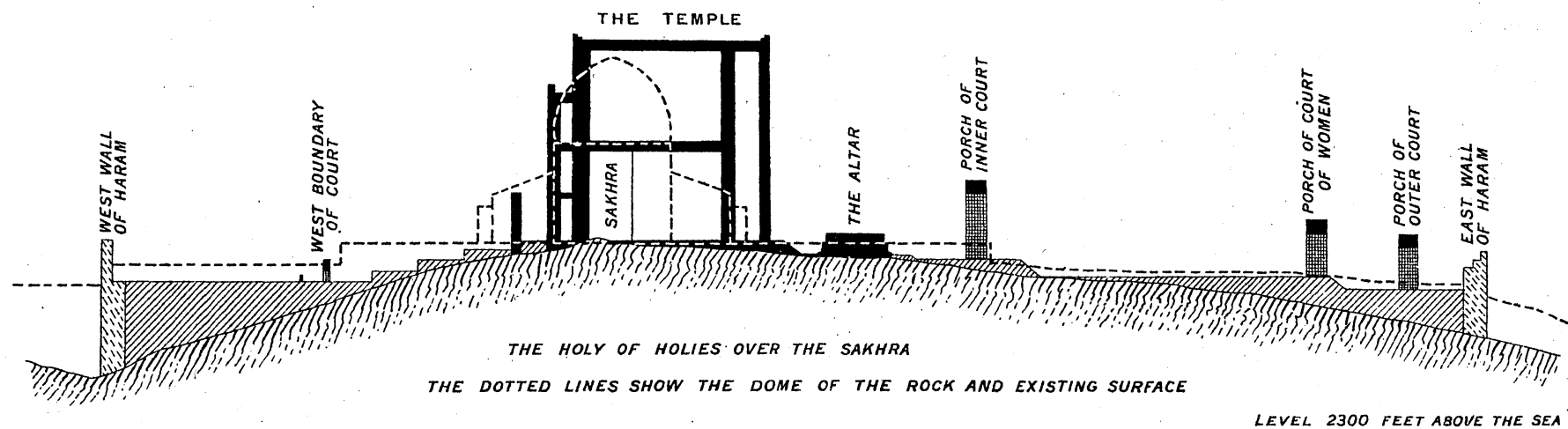
“The position of the Altar was determined with great care, nor did they ever change it from its place, as is said, ‘this is the Altar of the burnt-offering for Israel.’”

David's Altar was *on* the threshing-floor, and this fact alone is a proof that it could not have been on the Rock of the Sakhra, which from the roughness of its surface, would have been unsuitable. As those who have been in the East know, it is usual to construct a threshing-floor upon a flat surface, upon which the oxen can walk round and round to thresh out the corn. It is very probable, as Dr. Smith has explained, that the angel appeared on or over the Sakhra, but it is improbable that David would have placed the Altar on this spot. He would rather have chosen a place like the threshing-floor of Araunah, near to, but at a respectful distance from the Rock sanctified by the presence of the angel.

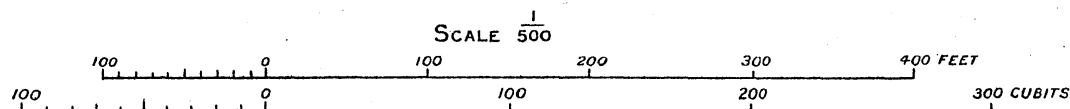
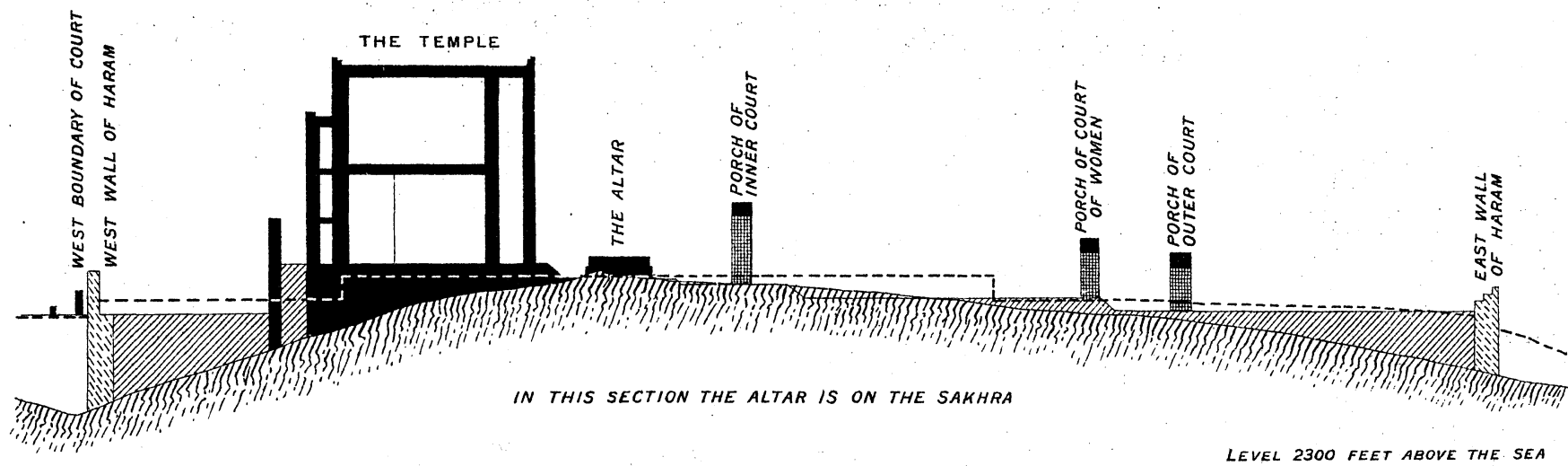
It must be remembered that David instructed Solomon as to the place where the Temple was to be built, and it can hardly be supposed that he told his son to remove the Altar that he had built on such a memorable occasion, and to use the bare Rock of the Sakhra as the place of burnt-offering. That the Altar existed at the

¹ See translation of *Beth Habbechereh* in *Q.S.*, 1885, p. 37.

SECTION N° 1.



SECTION N° 2.



time of the dedication of the Temple is also quite clear from the account in 1 Kings viii, 22: "And Solomon stood before the Altar of the Lord in the presence of all the congregation of Israel, and spread forth his hands towards heaven."

It is, however, quite likely that Solomon, while religiously preserving David's Altar, added dignity to it by encasing it in bronze. In doing this, he would have followed the example of Moses, when, after the rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, he took the two hundred and fifty bronze censers of the insurgents and had them beaten out into plates to cover the altar.¹ After Solomon had done this, it is natural that, although the rough stones were still underneath, the altar should have been spoken of as a brazen altar, which was described as being 20 cubits (30 feet) long, 20 cubits broad, and 10 cubits in height.²

The result that one arrives at from the records is that the position of the Altar was never changed from the day when it was first built by David on the threshing floor of Araunah, until the final destruction of the Temple by Titus after the capture of Jerusalem. There is, however, no definite statement as to what this position was, though it is not likely it was on the Rock of the Sakhra, on account of the unsuitability of its surface for use as a threshing-floor.

I will now turn to a consideration of the question from a different point of view, that of the form of the hill upon which the Temple was built, as ascertained by modern exploration. To make the matter clear, a Plate is annexed showing sections across the hill, to illustrate the two different theories. These sections are drawn from west to east. The existing surface of the ground is shown, and also the rock surface as it is probably at the present time. The sections of the Temple and its Courts are taken from the description in the Mishna, and in Josephus.³

In Section No. 1, the Holy of Holies of the Temple is shown as being over the Rock of the Sakhra, and the Altar of burnt offering on the comparatively level surface of the hill to the eastward.

In Section No. 2, the Altar is shown upon the Sakhra, as proposed by Dr. Adam Smith, and the Temple to the westward of it. An examination of these sections will show, more clearly than any

¹ See Numbers xvi, 35-40.

² See 2 Chron. iv, 1; Josephus' *Antiquities*, Book VIII, Chap. 3, vii.

³ See *Q.S.*, 1896, p. 47.

verbal description, how much more probable the first theory is than the second.

In the accounts of the construction of the Temple given by the Rabbis, they are unanimous in stating that the foundation was 6 cubits deep, built of solid masonry ; and that, as this foundation was 6 cubits deep at the front of the Temple, there were necessarily twelve steps, each of half a cubit, descending from the porch of the Temple to the Court in which the altar was placed.¹ Josephus also describes the twelve steps leading up from the Altar to the porch of the Temple. There can, I think, be no question that this foundation was absolutely solid, and was constructed so as to give a flat surface upon which to build the Temple upon the summit of the Hill. Section No. 1 shows how exactly such a construction would fit the rock surface of the Holy Mountain, assuming that the Holy of Holies was placed over the Sakhra.

But if, on the contrary, the Altar is placed on the Sakhra, then the Temple must be shifted to the westward, as shown on Section No. 2, and in place of a foundation six cubits in depth, it would have been necessary to construct an enormous mass of masonry, many feet in depth, for the heavy walls of the Temple to rest upon. Such an arrangement seems quite out of the question, and it is in complete contradiction to the statements of the Rabbinical writers, who certainly knew a great deal more about the Temple than we do. Dr. Smith has suggested in the passage quoted above, that the foundation of the Temple may have been on substructures, but there is no hint of this in any of the descriptions, and, considering the enormous weight of the walls of the Temple, it is most unlikely. In a note on the Beth Habbechereh, the late Dr. Chaplin gives the following quotation from the *Tafaereth Israel* on the subject² :—

“It was the foundation, and was six cubits high, because the mountain rose and fell, and the Temple and the porch were built upon the top of the mountain upon the level ground, and the walls stood near the place where the mountain began to descend, and thus, in order to give to the house a firm foundation without tottering, they built a foundation of hewn stones around the above-mentioned level ground six cubits high.”

¹ See “translation of *Beth Habbechereh* in *Q.S.*, 1885, pp. 52, 185 ; also Translation of *Middoth* in *Q.S.*, 1887, pp. 119, 124.

² See *Q.S.*, 1885, p. 52.

It will be seen how exactly the arrangement shown in Section No. 1 meets this description. On the other hand, there is no description of the Temple which has come down to us that could be reconciled with a description of the foundation as shown in Section No. 2.

In a note on page 61, Dr. Smith expresses the opinion that, if the Holy of Holies was placed over the Sakhra, there would not have been room for the eastern courts of the Temple; but, as is shown by Section No. 1, there is amply sufficient room for these courts within the existing area of the Haram. If, however, the Altar was on the Sakhra, and the Temple west of it, then Section No. 2 shows that while there is an unnecessary waste of space between the eastern limit of the courts and the east wall of the Haram, the western limit of the outer court falls outside the west wall of the Haram, and right over the bottom of the Tyropean Valley. This is out of the question, as there can be little doubt that the west wall of the Haram area stood on its present line at the time that Herod rebuilt the Temple. The description of the siege of the Temple in the *Wars of the Jews*, Book VI, makes it quite clear that there was an interval between the western cloisters, which stood on the lines of the present west wall of the Haram, and the western boundary of the Temple Courts.

Such an interval is shown in Section No. 1, but, if the Temple had stood as in Section No. 2, it is necessary to make the width of the western court less than the dimensions recorded, or else the cloister would have crossed the court, which would contradict the description in Josephus.

Colonel Conder, who studied the question carefully, arrived at the conclusion that the Holy of Holies must have been placed over the Rock of the Sakhra, and in his *Handbook to the Bible*, he sums up his views on the subject in the following words¹ :—

“It appears thus clear that the Sakhra represents the *Eben Shatiyeh*, or ‘stone of foundation,’ which existed in the Holy of Holies (Yoma v, 2). On that rock the Ark stood, and it was supposed to be the original foundation of the world. The Talmudic commentaries make it clear that the Eben Shatiyeh was a rock rather than a stone (like the Eben Zohelath, which is also a rock, now called Zahweileh); the cave beneath the

"Sakhra may perhaps have been excavated for the reason assigned "in the Mishna for the existence of the other vaults, namely, to "insure the purity of the surface on which the Ark stood.

"Moslem tradition still points to the Sakhra as the site of the "Temple, and as the foundation of the world; and the same "tradition existed in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. "Foucher of Chartres (about 1100 A.D.) says that the Ark was, in "his time, supposed to be hidden in the Sacred Rock; while "Jacques de Vitry (1220 A.D.) speaks of it as the place where the "angel appeared to David. The Lapis Pertusus, or 'pierced stone,' "which the Jews used to anoint in the fourth century, is also "presumably the present Sakhra, pierced as it is by a vertical shaft.

"Araunah's threshing-floor must have been a level area of some "size, situated in a position where even the lightest breezes of "summer might be felt; for such is the situation now chosen for a "threshing-floor in Palestine. The rock levels show a flat area, "immediately around the Sakhra, suitable for such a purpose, while "to the south and north the ridge is narrow and its slopes steeper."

Dr. Chaplin, who gave much attention to the subject when living in Jerusalem, and who was thoroughly well acquainted with the Mishna, was of the same opinion, and regarded it as a settled point that the Rock under the existing Dome of the Rock marks the site of the Holy of Holies.¹

Having regard to the fact that the information to be derived from ancient writers and from tradition, and the knowledge of the site, based on modern exploration, all point to the conclusion that it is most probable that the Holy of Holies stood over the Rock of the Sakhra, it is a little difficult to understand how the idea originated that this was the site of the Altar of burnt offering; but however it may have started, it is certainly modern, and the arguments in its favour have little strength.

The final conclusions on the subject which I would venture to suggest are as follows:—

1. The Holy of Holies of the Temple was built over the Sakhra.
2. The Altar of Burnt Offering always occupied one position after its first erection by King David; and this position was on the summit of Mount Moriah, the centre of the Altar being nearly due east of, and about 180 feet distant from the Sakhra.

¹ See *Q.S.*, 1887, p. 133.